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SHELL SCOTT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MARCH, 1966 Vol. 1, No. 2

COMPLETE SHELL SCOTT SHORT NOVEL

DEAD GIVEAWAY

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

She was red-haired, uninhibited, curvy and all woman. Before Scott saw that she had caught him with his scruples down, she had him set up for a bit of girlish folly called Murder.

. . . . . 2 to 50

FEATURED NEW NOVELET

DARLING, YOU DESERVE ME
FLETCHER FLORA 58

NEW EXCITING NOVELET

MURDER ON MY MIND
I. G. EDMONDS 98

SIX NEW SHORT STORIES

THE EXTERMINATORS
ERIC CORDER 51
THE SEA TOWER
THEODORE MATHIESON 80
THE NATURAL NOTHING
JONATHAN CRAIG 91
THE DEADLY CHERUB
ARTHUR PORGES 118
A SMALL SIN
HAL ELLSON 128
KEY WITNESS
C. B. GILFORD 135

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DEAD GIVEAWAY

She was carrot-topped, dangerously curvy and woman all over, the sultry vixen who had taken a yen to show me some new rules to an old game called, "This Will Kill You."

A Complete SHELL SCOTT Short Novel

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

SHE CAME INTO MY office as if she were backing out of it, a thin, frightened-appearing mouse who looked like the picture taken before the Before picture, and she stared all around the office in a most bewildered way before even looking at me.

"You—are you Mr. Scott? It said on the door that— I—oh—"

It says on the door, *Sheldon Scott, Investigations,* but I'd never thought that was anything to crack up about. Not even my appearance—six-two, 205 pounds, stand-up white hair and

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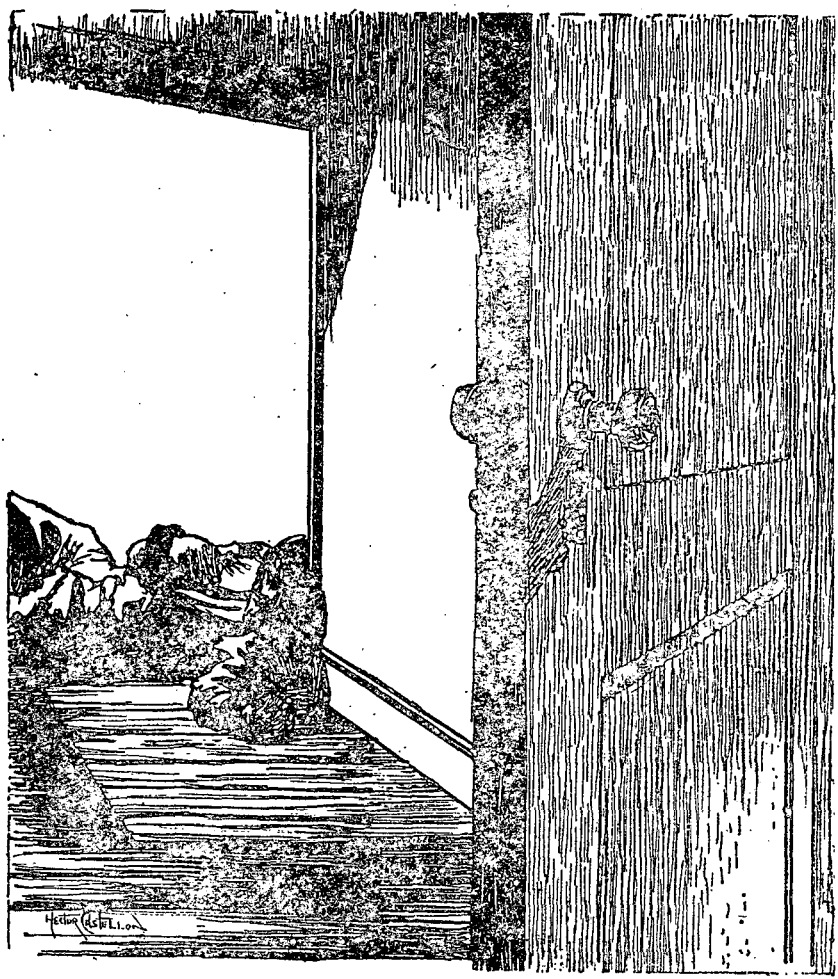

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whitish miniature-boomerang eyebrows, plus a slightly bent nose and a thin slice gone from my left ear —could have done this to her. Life could have. Or jaywalking through the Los Angeles traffic on Broadway one floor below. Or trouble. Well, people come to me when they're in trouble.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm Shell Scott."

I got her seated in the leather chair opposite my desk, then sat down again and waited.

She was about twenty-five years old, possibly less, with muddy brown hair and eyes and complexion. Squint lines of worry etched the skin around her eyes, and the corners of her thin-lipped mouth turned down. Her face was almost expressionless, as if she were trying to keep the features rigid and immobile.

She had been carrying a paper sack in her hand. Now she started to put it on my desk, changed her mind, started again and then let out a little sigh as if she wished she could leave the thing hanging there in the air.

Finally she reached into the sack and took out a bottle of milk. She put the bottle on the edge of my desk, and we both stared at it. I don't know what she was thinking, but I was thinking maybe she was in the wrong office. Next door to me is Dr. Elben Forrest, a consulting psychologist. He's pretty balmy himself, and all sorts of weird characters visit him.

But I didn't say anything except, "What did you want to see me about, ma'am?"

"I—I'm Llona Cabot," she said. "Mrs. Cabot. I'm married."

She paused, her head turned slightly sideways, peering at me from the corners of her eyes. Despite her plainness and drabness, she had a rather sweet look about her. Sweet—but naive, unknowing.

After a pause, she went on, "I've been married four days. And my husband has been—missing since late yesterday afternoon. I hope you can find Johnny. Something bad must have happened to him."

"Johnny's your husband?"

"Yes. Somebody must have hurt him. Maybe he's dead."

Her face didn't change expression, but her eyes, which had appeared shiny as glass, seemed to melt a little, two tears spilling from them and running down her cheeks. They reached her chin and for a second hung oddly from the flesh, like trembling beads, before falling to the dark cloth of her dress.

She went on, "Otherwise, he'd be with me. Maybe whoever's responsible for him being away is—is the same one who's trying to kill us."

"Somebody's tried to kill you?

"Two nights ago, Sunday night, just about dusk, I was walking to the little store near our place—I live on Robard Street—when the car almost hit me."

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"What car was that?"

"Just a car. I can't tell one from another. But it came down the street and, well, it seemed like whoever was driving it tried to hit me."

"Did you see who was driving?"

"No. I jumped and the car just barely missed me. I fell and skinned my leg."

She paused and I nodded encouragingly. I certainly didn't want her to show me her leg. She went on. "At the time I thought—well, that it was just an accident."

"But you apparently don't think so now."

"No." She pointed to the bottle on my desk. "I got the milk from the porch this morning and before breakfast gave some to Dookie—my little cat. She died right away."

Without touching the glass, I took the top off the bottle and smelled the milk. I'm not a poison expert, but with cyanide you don't have to be an expert. The odor was faint, but it was the smell of peach pits.

"Cyanide," I said. "I'm pretty sure."

It appeared that Mrs. Cabot was in the right office after all.

I found out what I could about her suddenly missing husband. Oddly enough, she didn't know very much. She'd met Johnny Cabot, it developed, on the seventeenth of this month, Saturday, exactly ten days ago.

I said, "You mean that you'd only known each other six days when you were married?"

She nodded. "It was—all of a sudden."

Two more shiny tears oozed from her eyes. And still there was no real change of expression on her homely face. It was as if pressure built up inside her head, forcing the tears out like fluid through a pinpoint opening in a mask of flesh.

"I'm awfully worried about him," she said. "He's all—he's all I've got."

And right then I moved over on to Ilona's side, not just because she was about to become a client, or because she seemed to be in trouble. It was Olona Cabot's voice when she said "all I've got." Not the words themselves so much, but the sound of them, the twisted, aching sound that she seemed to be trying so desperately to control. The way she said that her husband was all she had it sounded literally true.

Until ten days ago, Ilona had been Ilona Green, living cheaply and frugally by herself in a rented house on Robard Street and working in a secretarial pool at the Grandon Insurance Company on Hill Street. Usually, after leaving work, she said, she stopped for dinner at a cafeteria called Hansen's. That Saturday, ten days ago, she'd been eating when Johnny Cabot joined her at her table. They'd started talking, and from this casual

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meeting had gone on to a movie and arranged to meet the following day.

Three days after they'd met he'd proposed to Ilona, they'd got their blood tests and been married on Friday, four days ago.

Her husband had gone out after dinner last night, she said, about seven P.M., and hadn't come back. He had told Ilona he was a salesman for the Webley Dinnerware Company, but was on vacation. She didn't know where the company was located.

"What about this milk? When is it left at your house?"

"The milkman comes by about five every morning and leaves a bottle on our porch. Between five and a quarter after, usually."

"Uh-huh. And when did you get it from the porch this morning?"

"It was about six."

"So if somebody poisoned the milk, it was probably between five and six this morning." She nodded and I went on, "Where was Mr. Cabot when you almost got hit by that car?"

"He'd gone out for a walk. That was Sunday."

"Uh-huh." She didn't seem to find anything unusual in the fact that her husband had been nowhere around at the time of both attempts on her life. So I didn't mention it. Instead, I asked her to describe her husband.

Her eyes brightened and a smile touched her lips. She sort of glowed. She beamed. The man she described sounded like a composite of Greek gods and Roman athletes, so I asked her if she had a picture of him. She had brought one along in her purse.

Johnny Cabot even looked a little like a Roman athlete. In the snapshot, he was wearing swim trunks, leaning back on the sand with his elbows under him, sunlight glinting on almost as much muscle as tan. The features were sharp, and pleasant enough. He appeared to be a very well-built, good-looking guy about thirty. The expression was a bit surly, though. The dark eyes under heavy brows seemed angry, or resentful.

Take him back a couple of thousand years and put him in a different outfit, and he might well have been a Roman gladiator lying on his back in the arena, glaring up at some egg about to stab him with a trident. He was plenty good-looking, and that puzzled me; he and Ilona Cabot just didn't make a pair.

Ilona gave me their address and their phone number. And in a couple more minutes I was hired, for a minimum fee, to accomplish two things: first find Ilona Cabot's hubby, if he was still alive, and second learn who was trying to kill the Cabots—or kill Ilona. I had a feeling that the poison had been meant solely for her.

I told her she'd better move to another address temporarily, but

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she refused, saying that her husband might come home or try to get in touch with her there. I told her to be extremely careful about answering the door, and that I would phone or come by later in the day. She said that would be fine, and left.

As the door closed behind her, I picked up my phone and dialed police headquarters. I was still talking to Sergeant Prentiss in Missing Persons when the office door opened and my second caller of the morning came in. I didn't even look around for a few seconds, just finished asking Prentiss to let me know if they came up with anything from his bureau of the morgue on John Cabot, then started to hang up, and looked around, and dropped the phone.

This one would have made a pair with Johnny Cabot, gladiator. Or with Caesar. Or, especially, with me. Maybe it was just that she benefited so much by comparison, and that she had entered about fifteen seconds after the dull, drab one had left, but she seemed to have in abundance everything that Ilona had not.

2

THIS ONE was bright and sparkling, and her hair was red, fire-engine red, and that was appropriate because she would always be going to a fire.

She was about five feet, five

inches of spontaneous arson leaning forward on the desk, both hands far apart on its top, and that caused the white blouse she was wearing to fall away from her body far enough to reveal truly remarkable proportions.

"I hope you can help me," she said.

"Help you?" She had great big blue eyes and one of those mouths best described as ripe and red. It was plain asking for it.

She went on breathlessly—but breathing, as I took pains to notice. "Oh, I do hope you can help me."

"I do, too. I—"

"It's men. Men like you. And sex, and all that."

"I—sex?"

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"Yes. It's difficult to explain. Perhaps it's because I was so late getting started. I don't know how I could have been so casual about men before. Now I—I just want to hug them and *squeeze*—"

"Hug them and *squeeze*—"

"Like you. I could just hug you! Boy, could I *hug* you! You must be big as a house."

"I'm only six-two. Hardly a house. What the hell—"

"It's nice, but I can't go around like this all the time. Can't you do something to help me, Doctor? Prescribe something?"

"Honey, I know exactly what will . . . Doctor? What do you mean, Doctor?"

"Aren't you Doctor Forrest?"

"Hell, no," I said disgruntledly. "I'm only Shell Scott."

"Who's Shell Scott?"

"Me. I just told you, I'm just little old Shell Scott—oh, the hell with it."

"What have you done with Doctor Forrest?"

I got up and walked across the room to the bookcase against the wall. I looked at the happy, dumb, multicolored guppies cavorting in their small aquarium atop the bookcase. They crowded up at the front of the tank and ogled me, leaping about friskily, expecting me to feed them. But I merely dipped my fingers in the water and put them, cool and wet, on my temples.

When I'd got pretty well calmed down I said, "I haven't done anything to Doctor Forrest. He is right next door, where he belongs. Where you belong. Where, perhaps, I belong."

She laughed, but then got quiet for a moment. "You must mean I'm in the wrong office."

"Now you got it."

She stared at me, then said almost resentfully, "Well, it's a mistake anybody could have made. Especially when I saw that woman leaving here. That proved it."

"Proved what?"

"That this was a psychologist's office. A woman who looked like that would almost have to be coming out of a psychologist's office. What kind of an office is this, anyway?"

"I'm a private detective."

"Gracious. What would a woman like that want with a detective?"

"She wants me to find her husband, among other things."

"Husband!" She looked shocked. "Husband? I—well, who would have thought she'd have a husband?"

"Lady," I said, "this has all been very new and interesting, but it's time to call a halt. I have work to do."

"You must think I'm an awful goof. It's just that I had an appointment with Doctor Forrest and was so worried about telling him. I had to grab my courage with both hands if you know what I mean."

"I think I do."

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"I'm really not a goof. Normally I'm quite normal. But—well, I'm sorry. If I need a detective to investigate something I'll get in touch with ou, Mr. Scott. All right?"

I grinned. "That would be all right even if you *don't* need a detective to investigate something, miss. Is it Miss?"

She smiled. She was really an interesting, intriguingly fashioned female when she smiled like that. "Miss Carol Austin," she said. "Plaza Hotel, Room Thirty-seven, Mr. Scott."

"I'll remember. And call me Shell."

"Good-by." She walked to the door, then looked back at me. "Shell." She went out smiling.

I sat behind my desk, smiling. Then my eyes fell on the bottle of milk. Ah, yes; Ilona. I went back to work.

3

IT WAS afternoon before I came up with anything solid. By then I'd had the milk tested—it was loaded with enough potassium cyanide to kill a dozen people—and had located Johnny Cabot's address. At least it had been his address before he'd married Ilona.

At the Hall of Justice I got a copy of the application for marriage license which had been issued ten days before to Johnny Cabot and Ilona Green. He had, automatically, given his parents' true name and address. Mr. and Mrs. Anthon Cabitocchi lived at Pomona, California.

When I called them the Cabitocchis knew nothing of their son's marriage, but were able to supply me with the address at which they wrote him. That was Apartment 12 in the Franklin on Sunset Boulevard between L.A. and Hollywood.

By five P.M. I was talking to the manager there. After I'd identified myself and explained why I'd like to look over Cabot's room, the manager let me into Apartment 12, and followed me inside.

The room looked as if it had been very recently used. I asked the manager if Cabot were still living in the room. "Far as I know," he said. "Rent's paid up for another month."

In the bureau dreawer I found a stack of photographs. There were about twenty of them, each different and all of women. Ilona wasn't one of them. In the same drawer were two clippings from newspapers. One of them, yellowed by time, was brief mention of a paternity case that had been tried here in Los Angeles. A man named Willard Grant, 26, had been accused of fathering the child of one Mary Lassen, 18, but had beaten the case in court.

The other clip stated that William J. Grant had died after a long illness and that services for the "well-known local bachelor-mil-

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lionaire" would be held on the following Thursday.

A paternity case. I wondered why they were never called maternity cases. I also wondered what Johnny Cabot was doing with the two clippings—but then I hit pay dirt. It was a pay voucher, showing that John Cabot had received his salary from the Westlander Theater.

I'd never been to the Westlander, but I knew what and where it was—and I was very soon going to visit it for the first time. The Westlander was a burlesque house, but it was to the burlesque circuit about what Spike Jones is to classical music, or one pair of bloomers is to the Arabian Nights. On occasion newcomers to the game got their start at the Westlander, but usually the game was almost over before an act hit the small theater on Los Angeles Street.

I headed for Los Angeles Street.

The Westlander was showing a twin movie bill—*Dope Hell of the Sadistic Nudists,* and a film about a real negative thinker, *I Even Went Wrong Wrong.* In front of the small theater were stills from the movies, and nearly life-size photos of the burlesque queens currently appearing here.

I bought a ticket from the gal in the boot, turned and took a step toward the entrance, then stopped and blinked, and blinked again.

Opposite the box office was the large photo of a large gal, and even thought she was a young and shapely cretaure, especially in contrast to the others pictured here, and even though she was a long lush blonde with equipment which looked like what we might expect on next year's model, that wasn't why I was blinking.

I was blinking at the name printed on the picture's base—Ilona, the Hungarian Hurricane.

Ilona?

Just a few hours earlier I'd been talking to another Ilona, my client, Mrs. Johnny Cabot, who was the only Ilona I'd talked to in months, maybe even years. I looked the picture of this one over carefully, but she was for sure a different Ilona. I went inside.

In a couple minutes I'd located the manager inside his office. He was a pale, cigar-chewing man named Dent.

I identified myself and said, "I'm trying to locate Johnny Cabot. He still work for you?"

The manager nodded and said around his long brown cigar, "Yeah. That's funny, y'know? You comin' here."

"How's that?"

"Private detective, I mean. You're the second one been here in the last couple weeks."

"Oh? Who was the last one? What did he want?"

"Guy named—ah, Wells—Welch, that's it. Welch. Wanted to talk to Ilona. She's just started here, new to the business. He

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talked with her, then left with Johnny."

"Johnny Cabot?" Dent nodded and I asked, "What did he want with Cabot?"

"I dunno. I just saw them leavin' together."

"When was that?"

Dent checked some records in his desk. "Fifteenth, it must've been," he said. "Johnny asked off on Saturday the seventeenth, for ten days, and that detective guy was here a couple days before that. Johnny just got back today."

"Back? You mean he's here now?"

"Where'd you expect he'd be? Sure he's here."

"I— Did Cabot say why he wanted time off?"

"Just that something important had come up."

I was remembering that Cabot and Ilona Green had met on Saturday the seventeenth. "Okay if I talk to Cabot?"

"Sure. Have to wait a few minutes. He's my singer."

Dent showed me to a box seat at the side of the stage, briefed me on what remained of the show, and left.

The chorus was currently occupying the stage. It consisted of about twenty girls, or rather females, all leaping about with complete disregard of the pit band, shaking to the left and shaking to the right, and backward and forward; but the kindest thing I could say about them was that they were no great shakes.

When they trooped off into the wings, a tall, thin, bony babe trotted listlessly into view, smiling as if it were painful, and proceeded to take her clothes off like a woman preparing to go to bed alone on a freezing night, with only one thin blanket in the house. There just wasn't any joy in it. Her performance didn't make me feel good all over, as the saying goes. It didn't make me feel good any place.

Finally it was finished. The chorus trooped back on and began tap dancing to one number while the band played another, and a tall dark guy walked onstage carrying a microphone and its stand. A couple yards in from the wings he stopped, placed the mike before him, spread his arms wide and started singing.

So here, at last, was Johnny Cabot. Somehow I hadn't quite believed Cabot would be there, not until this moment. If the story Ilona Cabot had told me was true, Cabots' being here four days after his marriage, singing in a cheap burlesque house instead of home with his bride, just didn't make good sense to me. Not yet, anyway.

It was the gladiator boy all right. Sharp, good-looking features, heavy eyebrows, thick dark hair. He had that surly look still, I noticed, even though he was smiling most of the time.

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But I wasn't smiling. The sounds banging in anguish at my eardrums were coming from Johnny Cabot as if they were escaping. He had a high, squeaky voice that sounded like a musical saw being played in a swamp full of mosquitoes, and his stiff gestures might have been Frankenstein's monster blowing kisses at King Kong.

The girls swung to their right, bent their knees and threw their hands into the air, looking up toward the ceiling, as if they had all seen hairy tarantulas dangling from a crosswalk; then they all spun to the opposite side and did it again, while Johnny cried, "Tem . . . *tay* . . . shun!"

It wasn't the right song. Nothing would have been the right song, but Johnny made even "Temptation" sound like something midway between rock-and-roll and rack-and-ruin.

At last it was over. Johnny bowed and beamed to a complete absence of applause, then went offstage. The girls trooped out of sight. I got to my feet, ready to go backstage and talk to Cabot, but a voice cut in over the p.a. system, saying that we had reached the climax of the show—Ilona, the Hungarian Hurricane.

I watched it all.

The number was *Diane,* played slowly and deliberately, and Ilona was slow and deliberate in her movements, of which there were a great many, and many of them great. She was tall, wearing heels at least four inches high, with a lot of blonde hair and a lot of blonde skin showing, and she seemed to be enjoying herself almost as much as I was.

Let's face it. Men like to watch women take off their clothes. When the day comes when that isn't true any more, then we will have entered the Mental Age and will get our kicks at brain operations. But that day is not yet, so I gleefully ogled the last twitch of tassel, the final flick of bead, and then, when Ilona, the Hungarian Hurricane, bounced and jiggled out of sight, I got up and headed backstage for my first words with Johnny Cabot.

4

I FOUND HIM in a small room off a hall smelling of powder and perspiration. A stagehand pointed to the room and when I knocked Cabot opened the door and glared out at me. That is, he looked out at me, but the general arrangement of his features made it appear that he was always glaring, or perhaps on the verge of biting somebody.

He was about my height, but slimmer, with thick wavy black hair and light blue eyes. I'm pretty brown myself, but this guy must have made a career of soaking up sun because he made me look anemic by comparison. Those pale blue eyes were startlingly light in his darkly bronzed face.

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He was good looking, all right, but to me, anyway, he had the look of those guys who star in pornographic movies. He looked weak, much more physical than mental, not clean-cut, not pleasant. He stood there smiling at me, and while it wasn't a bad smile, I almost wanted to go at it like a mad dentist.

Once in a while you meet guys like Cabot. It's as if odorless skunk waves keep coming out from them at you. I wondered how my client had failed to notice it. But maybe he affected women differently.

He had his shirt off, and thick muscles moved on his chest. It seemed incredible that a voice so thin could come out of a chest so thick.

"Yeah? What you want?"

"You John Cabot?"

"Yeah. So?"

I flipped open my wallet and flashed the photostat of my license in front of his face. His eyes aimed at it and barely focused on it as I snapped the wallet shut and stuck it back in my coat. Sometimes, if you do that fast enough, people think you're some kind of important official. Like a policeman.

"I'm Scott," I said brusquely. "Mind telling me where you were this morning? Early—say about three to six A.M."

He said slowly, "I had a supper date. You know, real late. From about one till after six."

"Six in the morning?" That seemed like an odd time for a date of any kind. Well, almost any kind.

"Yeah," he said. "Gal didn't get off until after midnight."

"Get off where?"

"Club out on Beverly," Cabot said. "The—Grotto." He paused. "Say, you're not a cop, are you?"

"Nobody said I was. I'm Shell Scott, a private investigator."

He spat out foul words. "Private! Why, you son—"

"Hold it, friend. You can watch your tongue or the ceiling."

He bit off the rest of his words, but said, "What in hell do you want with me? What's the score?"

"I'm checking up on an attempted murder."

He grinned, unpleasantly. "I haven't tried to kill anybody, Scott. If I had tried, I'd have killed him. Who was the victim?"

"The attempt was made on your wife. Matter of fact, she sent me out to find you."

"Ilona? She sent you? How in hell did she know—" He bit it off.

"How'd she know what, Cabot?"

"Beat it."

"Aren't you interested in an attempt on your wife's life? She thought maybe it was an attempt on your life, too, since somebody poisoned the milk and you might have drunk some. I don't see it that way, but—"

"I got no more to say to you."

"What about Welch?" For a stab in the dark it got quite a reaction.

"Huh?" Cabot's face got almost

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pale. The blood did leave his face for a while, and that tan over pallor made him look sick. Maybe he was sick.

"Welch?" he said scowling truculently. "I—I don't know anybody named Welch."

I grinned at him. "No. You always look like this. You know who I mean, Cabitocchi. A detective named Welch."

He stared at me stupidly. His mouth opened and closed. But then he balled up his fists and stepped toward me, anger flushing his features and making him appear normal again.

I thought for a second I was going to get to hit him, but something made him stop. A sort of crafty look appeared in his pale blue eyes. He took a deep breath and let it out, then said levelly, "Out. Out you go, Scott. You're a private dick, and if you bother me any more, I'll—" he grinned nastily—"call a cop."

Then he just stood there and looked at me grinning. He was right, too. A private detective is merely a private citizen, and if I were to let my emotion rule my knuckles, I could very well wind up in the clink. I left.

I had a lot more to puzzle me now than I'd had when I'd come into the Westlander Theater. I'd found Cabot, all right, but the big half of the job was no closer to a solution; I still didn't know who'd tried to kill my client, Ilona.

The thought of one Ilona led logically to thought of the second one. After half a minute and one more question of a stagehand, I was knocking on another dressing-room door. This time it was the dressing room of Ilona, the Hungarian Hurricane.

A voice inside said, "Just a minute," with no accent at all except the feminine one. Then the door opened.

The only similarity between this gal's expression and Johnny Cabot's was that she looked as if she were going to bite somebody, too. But gently. With eclat, verve, abandon. "Yes?" she said softly.

"Yes, indeed, I just saw your act—"

"Oh, good. Come in." I went inside and she said, "I'm just learning, you know. Did you like it? My dance?"

"You bet. It was real . . . likable."

"Wonderful!" she cried enthusiastically, and gave a little bump from sheer joy. "Wonderful!"

Ilona was wearing an abbreviated robe which looked a bit like one of those shortie nightgowns and fell down her thighs only about halfway. It was blue, and made a pretty contrast with her white skin.

"I practice all the time," she said. "You know what they say, practice makes perfect."

"That one was pretty near perfect right there."

"*Thank* you," she squealed.

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"Uh, my name is Shell Scott." I finally got to tell her I was a detective, and asked her about her co-performer, Cabot. She thought he was real nice. She'd been working here only a little over two weeks, and Cabot had been here the first week only.

So there wasn't much she could tell me about Cabot, but remembering his reaction to detective Welch's name, I asked the Hungarian Hurricane, "Do you know a man named Welch?"

"No." She was walking around the room, snapping her fingers and everything. "Who is he?"

"Another detective. I understood that he talked to you here a couple weeks ago. About that long back."

"Oh, him. Yes, sure. What about him?"

"Would you mind telling me what he wanted with you?"

She was standing in front of the full-length mirror, leaning slightly back from it and practicing; then she glanced at me and said, "You don't mind if I do this, do you?"

"No." I grinned. "Go right ahead."

"I just want to get the rough edges off this movement. I think I've got most of them off now."

"I'd say so."

"What was it you asked me?"

"I don't remember."

"Oh, yes. About that detective. He just asked me if I'd ever been in the Bunting Orphanage here in Los Angeles, and I told him no, and he thanked me and left."

Suddenly she let out a wild, high-pitched noise.

"What was that?" I said. "You all right?"

She hadn't even stopped what she was doing.

"Oh, that was just my squeal," she said.

"Your what?"

"Squeal. You know, toward the climax of my act, when I'm all a-frenzy, I squeal. It adds something."

"I see. Yes, it would add something. Bunting Orphanage, huh? What did he want to know that for?"

"I don't know. That was all he asked me, and then he left."

"You ever seen him before?"

"No. Nor since."

"Do you know if he was a friend of Johnny Cabot's?"

"I don't know. Johnny asked me what the detective wanted with me, though—right after the detective talked to me."

"He did, huh? What did you tell him?"

"The same thing I just told you."

She described Welch as about five-ten, slim, with a black mustache and black hair, beginning to get gray. She had no idea where Welch lived, but she didn't think he was a Los Angeles detective.

That was about it. She was almost ready to squeal again, any-

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way, and as a matter of fact so was I, so I thanked her and went out. Not all the way out, though; Johnny Cabot was waiting near Ilona's dressing room for me. He waved a hand at me and I walked over to him.

"Listen, Scott," he said grimly. "Get something through your head. I don't want no more trouble from you."

This guy irritated me like a slap on sunburn, but I kept my voice quiet enough as I said, "If you don't want trouble, you're sure going at it the wrong way, Cabot."

"Yeah? Well, I'm telling you, stay away from my wife, see? And from me, and anybody connected with me. If you snoop around any more, get in my hair any more, I'll bust your skull."

"Quit wiggling your muscles, Cabot. At least you admit you're married."

"So my wife hired you. Well, you're fired."

"I'll wait till I hear from your wife."

He glared at me. "It's enough if you hear it from me. You're finished; no more job."

"What are you afraid of, friend? You didn't try to knock off your wife, did you?"

He was burning. "If I wanted to kill somebody I wouldn't use cyanide, I'd use a gun. And a bullet can poke a hole in you just as easy as anybody else, Scott. Remember that."

He spun on his heel and stalked off before I could reply. It was just as well; I had rapidly been reaching the point where my next reply would have been to sock him in the teeth.

I went out of the Westlander Theater, found a phone booth in a drugstore, and dialed the number my client had given me this morning.

There wasn't any answer to my ring. I frowned at the phone for a moment, then went back to my Cadillac and drove toward Robard Street.

From my client's house and on past it for perhaps a quarter of a mile, Robard was a one-way street. I parked at the left curb and walked up to the front door. There was no answer to my ring, and I'd started to turn away when I noticed the front door was ajar.

I knocked loudly, then went on in.

It was a small, neat place. There wasn't anything unusual about it except that it was empty, and on

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the kitchen table were some dirty dishes, one of them containing part of a lamb chop and some broccoli. A half-glass of milk sat beside the dish containing the meat. It appeared as if whoever had been eating had left in a hurry.

I lit a cigarette and looked down at the kitchen table, thinking. It seemed fairly clear that Cabot must have immediately phoned Ilona after I'd talked to him at the burlesque theater—before I'd phoned her. One word from him and his bride would naturally have flown to him as fast as she could—not even waiting to finish her lamb chop and broccoli.

I was becoming more and more worried about Ilona Cabot. Somebody had tried twice to murder that mousy, sweetly miserable little gal, and I was pretty sure whoever it was would keep on trying. The thought struck me that right this minute I had no proof she was still alive.

I kept thinking about that angle as I got into the Cad and headed on down Robard. The first street at which I could turn off was Garnet, and I swung right there. I'd barely straightened the car out when it happened.

I heard the sound of the shot, but didn't react for a second or so. The slug splatted through the glass and I saw the hole suddenly appear far over on the windshield's right side, as the heavy sound of the gunshot reached my ears.

For a second or two I looked stupidly at the hole near the windshield's edge, at the white lines radiating from it and spreading like thick cobwebs over the glass. And then I hit the brake pedal so hard that I shoved myself back into the upholstery of the seat behind me.

The power brakes caught and grabbed, tires shrieking on the pavement as the car slid and turned slightly toward the curb. I jerked the steering wheel left, then slapped my foot on to the accelerator again. I straightened the Cad out and let it pick up speed for half a block, then pulled in to the curb and stopped.

I had the door open and was starting through it, right hand under my coat and touching the butt of my .38 Colt, when I stopped. There wasn't much point in charging back down the street like an Olympic sprinter. Whoever had taken that shot at me was almost surely a lot farther away now than he'd been when he let the slug fly at me. Or when she had. A bullet out of the night is anonymous.

But I could count the people who might know that I was going to visit this address on one finger, or two at most if I included Ilona herself. Somebody might conceivably have tailed me from downtown and then waited near the turnoff on Garnet; but it didn't seem likely. So I was extremely anxious to see Johnny Cabot once again.

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5

I LOOKED around, but after twenty minutes I hadn't learned anything new. People in a couple of houses admitted hearing the gunshot, or "backfire," but that was as close as I got. I did use the phone in one of the houses and called the Westlander Theater. When Mr. Dent came on and I asked for Johnn Cabot, he exploded.

"What'd you do to him? What's happening? All of a sudden my star singer's gone. Right after you talked to him he lit out and I ain't seen him since."

I told him I hadn't done anything to Cabot and got him calmed down. Finally he promised to keep it under his hat that I'd called, if Cabot did arrive. I told Dent I'd be phoning him again, then drove into downtown L.A. and spent some more time trying to locate Johnny Cabot or Ilona, without success.

I checked again at the Franklin, where Cabot still had his apartment, but he hadn't turned up there. The twenty bucks I left with the desk clerk, however, assured me of the clerk's prompt cooperation if and when Cabot or Ilona showed up.

Cabot had said he'd spent most of last night, or rather this morning, with a gal who worked at the Grotto. If that was true, he couldn't very well have slipped the cyanide into Ilona's milk.

I headed for the Grotto.

It was a long, low, gray building on Beverly Boulevard. Shortly before eight P.M. I turned my car over to the parking attendant and went inside. The first thing that caught my eye was a colorful poster in its glass-covered case alongside the checkroom.

It was a large photograph of a busty mermaid resting on her back at what seemed to represent the bottom of the sea. Diving down through the water above her was a muscular male in a pair of bikini-type trunks. The mermaid was, typically, fish from the waist down, but from the waist up there was nothing fishy about her. Long hair streamed through the water like black seaweed, and the whiteness of her skin glowed phosphorescently in the greenish water. A shaft of light fell from above her and touched the white, prominent breasts.

Painted letters that looked like seaweed at the poster's top announced that the Grotto proudly presented "The Neptune Ballet" in the Underseas Room. At the bottom of the big card, more seaweed letters announced that Dan Thrip was the Sea Satyr, and Ilona Betun was "Neptuna, the Venusian Mermaid."

Ilona?

Ilona.

Well, I thought, I'll be damned.

I looked at the shapely mermaid again. If the poster hadn't been a photograph, I might have thought

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the artist was an advertising man accustomed to ludicrous and enormous exaggeration, but this was a photograph, and this gal was quite obviously not my Ilona, not my client.

It is sometimes possible for a reasonably attractice gal to appear uglier than a dead skunk merely by removing all makeup and failing to put up her hair. Add a drab dress and a frown, and the lovely of the night before often becomes the goon of the morning after.

But taking it off is one thing, and putting it on is another. What this mermaid had, gals cannot put on; they have to grow. And grow, and grow.

Almost reluctantly, I turned away from the poster and looked around. Several people sat at the bar and tables, drinking and talking. Near me a young couple was having dinner, thick steaks sizzling on metal platters.

A haze of cigarette smoke hung in the air.

I found the manager in his office. He was about five-ten, thin, white-skinned, with receding brown hair and an empty cigarette holder stuck in the side of his mouth.

He was scribbling on a paper before him. "Yeah?"

"My name's Shell Scott. I'm a private detective." I showed him my credentials. "You're the manager?"

"Yeah. Joe Grace. Detective, huh? What you want with me?"

"It's not you personally. I'd like to talk to Ilona Betun."

"Uh-huh. You're the second detective that's been in here wanting to see her. This wouldn't just be a gag to get close to the doll, would it?"

"No. Who was this other detective?"

"Guy named—Welch, I think it was. Like on a bet."

"Do you know what he wanted to see her about?"

Grace shook his head. "Didn't tell me. Went up and talked to her, that's all I know about it."

He looked at his watch. "Just about show time now. You want to talk to Ilona, you'll have to wait till after the show." He paused. "Join me at my table in the Underseas Room if you want to. We'll catch the show from there."

I told him okay, and he led me out of his office and into the room I'd noticed earlier. The Underseas Room was dimly lighted, not large, and probably held no more than fifteen tables or so, but every table was occupied. Imitation seaweed hung from the ceiling, and ornamental nets adorned the side walls.

The entire wall directly opposite the door was glass, except for about three feet at the wall's base, and as we got closer I could see that the space beyond that glass wall, extending in for six or eight feet, was filled with water. It was like a high, wide, but narrow aquarium, a room of water.

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Soft greenish light filled the room-aquarium, fell on seaweed moving slowly as if touched by delicate currents, on the rippled sand that formed the acquarium's floor. Joe Grace's table was almost against the glass wall, over toward its left side.

As he sat down I climbed into a chair opposite him and he asked me what I'd like to drink. I told him bourbon and water, and he sent the waiter off for our highballs. The drinks arrived almost before I could get a cigarette lighted. I had a gulp of the barely watered bourbon as Grace said, "Ah, here we go."

Right after his words I heard a soft chord from the band on a small, raised bandstand inside the entrance. A man's voice was saying that we were about to witness the first show of the evening. He told us in hushed, intimate tones that the Sea Satyr and Neptuna would cavort in the Underwater Ballet for our pleasure, and finally finished with, ". . . the Grotto is proud to present the lovely, the luscious, the exciting—Neptuna!"

There was a fanfare from the combo, then sudden silence. In the silence a figure plunged through the water of the tank, trailing silvery bubbles in its descent toward the floor of sand. Music began again, softly, a weird melody unfamiliar to me, and the figure slowed as it neared the sand.

From her waist down, Neptuna wore a closely fitted fish tail, dark green and apparently covered with metallic scales. From the waist up she was nude, her breasts brazenly thrust forward, bare and whitely gleaming.

Neptuna, or Ilona, swam through the water with surprising ease and gracefulness, despite the fact that her legs were held together by the rubber costume. I couldn't guess how tall she might be, but she was beautifully proportioned. The green rubber costume clung tightly to flaring hips, and above them was a sharply indented waist that accentuated both her hips and the heavy breasts.

She arched her body slowly, easily, twisting in the water, curling around a black rock and then through the thick grasses.

Two or three times she swept her arms back and rose to the water's surface, then twisted around and swam down again. After the last trip up and down again, as she approached the side of the tank where Joe Grace and I sat, she swam almost touching the glass and I got my first good look at her face.

I had never seen her before, but I was looking forward to seeing her again. It was a very pretty face, and what I could see of the body was sensational, and if the legs were even halfway nice, this was a tomato who could model for lipstick, brassieres, hose, or harems.

What I'd thought a big gray rock lying on the sand turned out to be a

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giant artificial clam. It opened up as Neptuna swam near it. As she rolled over on her back and neatly maneuvered her tail fin past the edge of the clam's shell, it closed suddenly on her and held her captive.

It was neatly done, and there were even a couple startled or frightened yips from women in the audience. Neptuna twisted and jerked as if in a panic, throwing her body from one side to the other, and her white breasts shivered, rolled on her chest, quivered in the water as she jerked and turned.

Then there was another silvery stream of bubbles as a guy in flesh-colored bikini trunks—the Sea Satyr—dived through the water. His part of the rescue didn't take long, since Neptuna had been holding her breath for quite a while, but he hammed it up for fair in the time he had.

I was forced to admit, though, that he looked strong enough to handle a dozen giant clams, even with a couple sharks and a swordfish thrown in. He knifed the clam, which freed Neptuna, whereupon she zipped to the surface for air. then down alongside the guy again. She swirled around him and rubbed up against him, and the sight of those big white breasts sliding against his sun-darkened chest was a good deal more sensual than the pictures in movie magazines.

Then the lips of the two undersea dancers met in a kiss. The lights in the tank went out and it seemed as if the water suddenly turned to ink.

Grace said, "How'd you like it, Scott? Pretty good, huh?"

"Yeah. I'll come in and pay the cover charge next time. Thanks for the vantage point and the drinks, Grace."

I got up. "By the way, how do I get up to your star's dressing room? I hope I don't have to swim—"

He interrupted, chuckling, "No. I'd better show you, though."

Grace led me to the rear of the club and up wooden stairs to the second floor. Three or four doors opened off a hallway there, and he took me to the third one, where he knocked.

There was the sound of bare feet padding across the floor inside, then the door opened and Neptuna was looking out at us.

Grace said, "This's Shell Scott, honey. Private detective. Help him out if you can. Don't want anybody raiding the joint."

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"Sure, Joe." She glanced at him as he turned and left, then looked back at me. "Come on in." The voice was deep, throaty, soft. Even if she were to shout, I thought, that voice would have warm whispers in it.

She stepped aside and I went into her dressing room. As she closed the door behind us I got a glimpse of a big dressing table with a huge mirror over it, a wall closet with its sliding door partly open, a yellow bamboo screen between the dressing table and closet, and the gleam of light reflected from the surface of water at floor level on my left. But then she'd stepped up beside me and I was looking at Ilona—Neptuna—again.

It was worth another look.

Up close she looked even better than I'd expected. The big eyes were dark, with black brows above them like smears of midnight on her smooth white forehead. The red lips were full, half parted. She wore a thin white robe and held a white towel on top of her head with both hands.

The pose did nothing to ruin the robe's appearance, though it pushed it quite a bit out of shape, emphasizing facets of Neptuna's figure that were already quite emphatic. She wasn't a very tall girl, but she had such an abundance of curves that, even if she'd been six feet tall, they would have been enough to stretch out and cover everything most satisfactorily.

"Mr. Scott, is it?" she said pleasantly.

"Shell. No need to be formal."

"Not in this outfit." She smiled.

All this time she was rubbing the towel over her hair, presumably to dry it, and that caused quite a commotion in the robe, and quite a commotion in me. Thick clumps of black hair escaped from the towel and hung down on one white-covered shoulder.

"I caught your act," I said. "First time. It was sensational."

"You liked it then?"

"Yes, indeed." I tried a gentle sally. "Any time you need a new partner—"

"I know. You'll start holding your breath."

She didn't say it in a sarcastic way, though, but rather as if it were something she'd heard too many times already. She was bored with me.

"I imagine you get a lot of offers from people who can't swim."

"I do." She deftly tied the towel around her head, then cinched the robe's belt more tightly about her waist. She smiled again. "But I turn most of them down."

"Most, huh? How about Johnny Cabot?"

"Johnny? What about him?"

"You do know him, then."

"Sure. Is that why you came up here to see me?"

"One reason. When was the last time you saw Johnny—you don't mind the questions, do you?"

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"Certainly not. I saw Johnny last night."

So here it was. Cabot had been telling the truth, or else this lovely was lying, and I didn't like that thought at all. But something was real crazy here; maybe the guy was goofy for Ilonas.

"That would have been after you got off from work?" I said.

"Yes. My last show's at midnight. He picked me up about twelve-thirty and we had something to eat, and talked, you know. Then he dropped me at my apartment at maybe six."

"When did you meet him?"

"Couple weeks ago, about. We went out the night we met, and the next night. But then I didn't see him until last night."

"That's understandable," I said.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, he got married last Friday, and that kept him busy for two or three nights."

I was watching for the reaction, and it came slowly, but it came. It was, however, normal enough for a gal like Ilona Betun, assuming she wasn't really hot for the guy.

She frowned, started to speak, then stopped. Slowly she said, "Married? But he—is this a lousy joke?"

"No. He got married four days ago.

"Well . . . what has he been doing with me—I mean, why did he go out with me?"

"I'm curious about that, myself."

She shook her head. "This is a little too much. I thought . . ." She paused, then went on, "Well, he's been trying to make me believe he's in love with me."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he is."

She looked at me, frowning again. "That doesn't make sense."

"In a strange way, maybe it does. But it's too complicated to go into now. There's one other thing. Did you recently talk to a man named Welch? Another private investigator?"

She nodded. "Sure, I've even got his card around here somewhere. Isn't it funny—you just asked about Johnny, then about Mr. Welch, and I met them both on the same day."

"That is a little funny." I asked her to describe Welch, and it was the same description I'd got from the Hungarian Hurricane. I said, "What did Welch want to see you about?"

"The funniest thing. He asked me if I'd ever been in some kind of orphan's home. Of course I hadn't, and I told him so. He asked my age and where I was born and I told him." She shrugged. "And he left. What's it all about?"

"I'm not sure. But I'm getting an idea. This orphanage, could it have been the Banting?" I purposely mispronounced it.

"Yes . . ." She nodded slowly. "That's about—Bunting. That's what it was, Bunting."

"You remember what day it was

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that Welch came here? And that you met Cabot?"

She thought a minute. "It was either the fifteenth, or not more than a day off either way."

"That's good enough. Johnny knew this Welch, then, huh?"

She looked a little puzzled. "Not that I know of."

"Then you didn't meet them at the same time?"

"No. The detective came here before my first show. And I met Johnny after the last show."

"Welch ever explain why he asked you about the orphanage?"

She shook her head. "He was up here only a couple of minutes. I had to shoo him out so I could get ready for my act. He did say that I was the wrong Ilona, then he thanked me and left."

So both the Hungarian Hurricane, and Neptuna, had turned out to be the wrong girl, the wrong Ilona. That pretty well told me who the right Ilona was.

NOW THAT our interview was about over, I looked around again. Two or three inches below floor level, at the left side of the room, water moved gently. It seemed quite strange to see a room with part of the floor wet and liquid, which was the impression I got.

I said to Ilona, "So that's the stage for the floorshow. It looks a good deal different from down below."

"I'll bet it does. You know, I've done that act hundreds of times, but I don't know what it looks like."

"Logical enough. Take my word for it, though—you look gorgeous. The whole act is terrific."

"Such enthusiasm!" She smiled. Then she said, "It's almost two hours until the next show, and I don't usually sit around in *nothing* but a robe."

I felt sure that she had purposely emphasized the word "nothing." "So do you mind," she went on, "if I get into something more comfortable?"

"No." I was grinning. "Of course *not*."

Her own smile was pretty close to a grin as she turned and walked away from me. My hopes were pretty high, but then I remembered the bamboo screen. I remembered because Ilona went behind it, then turned to face me. The top of the screen came just an inch or two below the tops of her shoulders. And now I noted, too, that the strips of bamboo were not right up against each other. That is, there were small spaces between them.

I could see little strips of white that were her robe. Then, with one easy movement she pulled the robe from her shoulders and let it fall to the floor behind her.

Before, I had seen little strips of white that were Ilona's robe. Now I could see little strips of white that were Ilona's.

It wasn't an awful lot, but it *moved*. Ilona stepped a short dis-

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tance to one side and reached for something, then bent down and stepped into it. She reached again and slipped a blouse over her head, then reached once more and stepped into what was obviously a skirt. I counted very carefully, however, and she reached only three times.

Then she stepped out from behind the screen and walked barefoot a few feet from the screen, and even if I had not counted, I would still have known she'd reached only three times. Suddenly Ilona stopped, put her hands on her hips, and looked at me.

"Well," she said, "you look like a man who plans to come back for the second show."

That snapped me out of it. "No, ma'am, I have work to do."

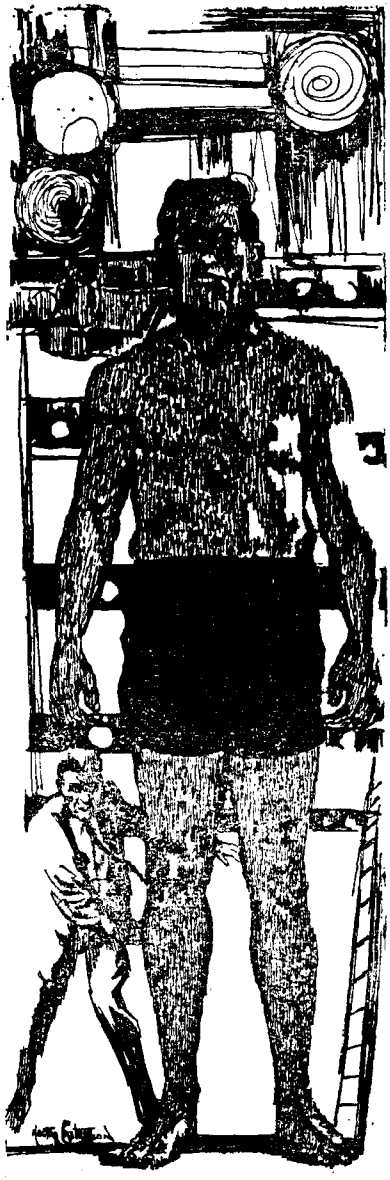
She chuckled. "Don't be stuffy. I was hoping you did plan to be here. I thought I might put in one little fin flip just for you."

"It might be your fin, Ilona, but it would be my flip."

She smiled. "That's better."

"Seriously, I do have a lot to do in the next few hours, but—well, a man can't work all the time. Perhaps we could—" I stopped as a thought struck me. "Johnny Cabot isn't planning to pick you up tonight, is he?"

"I should say not! After what you told me? Nothing was said about it last night, anyway. Besides," she added frankly, in music to my ears, "I'd much rather be with you." She paused, then went



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on slowly, "I'll be around a while after two. Just in case you get all your work done."

She smiled widely. "Sometimes, you know, I wait till the club is closed and locked, and nobody but me is here, and I have a little swim all by myself. Practice the new act."

"Swim . . . by yourself . . . here?"

She nodded.

"Well, that's—interesting." I changed the subject. "I'd like to talk with this Welch. You know where he lives? Or where his office is?"

"No."

"He a local man?"

"I don't know that for sure, either. But I think he was from out of town. We just had a real short talk, and he didn't tell me much except his name—I remember he said his first name was Harry. Harry Welch."

I thanked her and went out. Downstairs again I hunted up Joe Grace and asked him, "When Welch—the other detective—came in and talked to you, was he alone?"

"Let's see. Was when he talked to me. But I think he came in with a younger guy. Yeah, they watched the show and had dinner."

"Do you remember what this other guy looked like?" He shook his head, and I showed him the picture I carried of Johnny Cabot.

"Sure," Grace nodded. "I remember now thinking he was even more tanned than Dan Thrip. And them pale blue eyes—yeah, that's the one it was. What about him?"

"I was just curious. I'm real anxious to see him. Thanks again. I'll send in some customers."

He grinned at me as I left. Well, Cabot had hit the Grotto, then, in the company of Detective Welch. The longer this day lasted, the more puzzled I got. But a ray of light was beginning to filter into my thoughts now. There wasn't anything especially strange about there being three—or even three hundred—gals named Ilona in Los Angeles. But it seemed odd indeed that Johnny Cabot should know all three of them. More—he worked with one, dated another, and was married to the third.

My running into one Ilona after another had sort of staggered me for a while, because I'm extremely leery of coincidence. But when I ignored coincidence, the light began to filter.

The reason that Cabot knew three gals named Ilona, obviously, was because he'd made it his business to meet them and get to know them. Two of them, anyway. He'd been working with the Hungarian Hurricane for a while, and that would explain his knowing her. But the other two he had managed to run into on purpose. On the 15th of this month he had met Ilona Betun. On the 17th he had met Ilona Green—whom I now thought of as the "right" Ilona—and on the 23rd he'd married her.

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There was food for thought in those items, and mainly it made me anxious to find Cabot and his bride —and Harry Welch. I put in a call to the house on Robard Street, but there was still no answer there. Dent was still fuming at the Westlander.

A call to the desk clerk at the Franklin got me the information that Cabot hadn't been in.

Harry Welch wasn't in the L.A. phone book or City Directory. I called half a dozen detective agency heads whom I knew personally, and several other investigators I knew by reputation, but none of them had ever heard of Harry Welch. The Bunting Orphanage, at least, was easy to find. The phone book listed it as at 7230 Orange Drive.

It was only eight-thirty P.M., so I phoned the place and talked to a Mr. Simpson. Judging by his voice, Mr. Simpson was about a hundred and eighty years old, and ready to give up the ghost. It was a voice always on the verge of saying good-by. But Mr. Simpson said, sure, he'd given a detective named Welch some information and yes, it would be all right for me to come out and talk to him.

I parked at the curb and walked up a cement path to steps before the wooden porch. The stairs creaked like rheumatic bones, sighed softly as I walked up on to the porch. At the right of the big door, above the push button of the bell, a small weathered brass sign said, BUNTING ORPHANAGE HOME.

Mr. Simpson answered my ring. He was little over five feet tall, with accents of white hair on his pink scalp, and a narrow face, but with brown eyes that were still alert and merry.

I told him that I was Shell Scott, the man who had just phoned him, and explained why I was here. Yes, he remembered about the other detective. After a few questions, to get him started, he told me all he knew about Welch and the detective's purpose in visiting the orphanage. It fitted well enough into the pattern that had so far developed.

Welch had told him, Mr. Simpson said, that on April 7th twenty-two years ago, a seven-month-old girl had been turned over to the Bunting Orphanage. The detective wanted to know what had happened to the girl and where he could find her now.

Mr. Simpson went on, in his quavering, soft voice, "Well, I checked the records and found the one he was after. Baby was brought here by the mother, Mary Lassen. She killed herself."

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"Mary Lassen committed suicide? When was that?"

"About a week after she left the infant here. Baby was born out of wedlock, and the way I figure it, the daddy didn't want nothing to do with either of them. Not then. Must of been somewhat of a strain for the woman. But the funny thing is, the father's the man that set the detective to looking up the girl."

"Who's the father?" This was beginning to get silly.

"Well, he's a man named William Grant—that is, he *was*. He's been dead and buried for some weeks."

Mr. Simpson went on to say that it was because of Grant's death—he thought, but wasn't sure—that Welch had come looking for the girl. Unfortunately, Simpson said, he hadn't been able to give Welch much help, because some of the orphanage records had been destroyed about ten years ago, and among them were the records of the girl's adoption. Thus Mr. Simpson had been unable to discover the name of the people who had adopted her.

"How about Welch?" I asked. "Did he tell you where he was from? Or where he was staying in town?"

Mr. Simpson shook his head. "Didn't tell me anything."

"Do you remember when he was here?"

"I checked after you called and asked about him. It was the twelfth. That was a Monday, little over two weeks back."

I had just one more question. I knew the answer, of course, but I asked it anyway, for corroboration. "You still haven't told me the girl's name."

"She didn't really have a last name till somebody adopted her. But her first name was Ilona," Mr. Simpson said.

7

I GOT BACK to my apartment a little after eleven P.M., having tried again, without success, to locate Johnny Cabot or his wife. I parked across North Rossmore from the Spartan Apartment Hotel, crossed the street, went inside, and trotted up the steps to the second floor. And as I reached the top I heard what sounded like somebody else trotting behind me.

I turned around in time to watch Carol Austin bounce up the last few steps. She stopped and looked up at me, panting a little. "Gracious, you move fast," she said.

"Well, hello. What are you doing—"

"You said I could see you at your office, remember?"

"Yes, but I hardly expected you to show up here. How did you know I lived . . ."

I let it trail off, remembering that this gal might conceivably do almost anything. She still looked as if she were going to a fire; even

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better, I decided, than she had this morning.

Carol Austin seemed to have dressed with more care, applied her makeup even more expertly, and of course she still had all the items which I had so happily itemized this morning; consequently she was a very tasty-looking dish indeed. So even though I was mentally shaking my head at her, I was lost.

There was a kind of hurt, bewildered look in her wide blue eyes, and she said slowly, "Is something the matter, Mr. Scott? Shouldn't I have come here? I looked you up in the book and got your address, and waited down in the lobby, and you'd said it was all right to come see you even if it wasn't for a case."

"Oh, that's all right," I said with enthusiasm. "Anything—everything's all right. Why, I'm happy you could make it."

"Oh, good!"

"Well, there's no point in just standing here, is there? My apartment's right down the hall, so why don't we—"

"Oh, that *would* be fun," she said.

The next twenty minutes were, while a bit disjointed, delightful nonetheless. Carol—after a couple of minutes it was Carol—seemed to think mine was a fascinating life, and wanted to know all about my work.

I explained to her that it was well she hadn't come here to hire me, because the case on which I was now engaged was occupying most of my time.

"What case? I didn't know— Oh, you mean that woman who was leaving your office this morning? You said her name was Ilona Cabot or something, didn't you?"

"Yeah, that's it." We were both sitting on the chocolate-brown divan in my front room. But we were at opposite ends of the divan, so we were yards apart. The divan is big enough to sleep on, or anything.

"Gracious," Carol went on. "Weren't you looking for her husband or something? Did you find him?"

"Yeah, and lost him. But let's not talk shop, Carol."

"Would you think I was awful if I asked if you had anything to drink here?"

I sprang to my feet. "What would you like? Bourbon? Scotch? A Martini, Manhattan—"

"Oh, my, I just meant a Coke or something."

"Nonsense. Though I have Coke."

"Well, all right. A Coke."

"But—"

"With just the teensiest bit of Scotch in it."

"Fine. A Scotch-and-Coke coming right up."

That was such a goofy-sounding drink, like bourbon and beet juice, that it suddenly reminded me of how she'd happened to wind up in

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my office this morning. I said, "Ah, Carol. How did you make out with Doctor Forrest?"

"Oh, fine. He gave me a pill. You know, to sort of—sort of calm me down."

"And did it calm you down?"

"Uh-huh. I'm fine now. Show me where everything is, and let me mix the drinks. All right? That would be fun."

She got up, took me by the hand and accompanied me to the kitchenette. I watched Carol mix her sticky concoction, then supervised her preparation of a sensible bourbon and water for me. Sensible, that is, except that she managed to slop even more bourbon than I'm accustomed to into my drink.

We got settled again, and I had a glug of my drink and relaxed. There wasn't a great deal of conversation as we finished our drinks, then Carol went alone into the kitchenette to mix a couple more. It seemed to take her quite a while, but I had that much more time to concentrate on problems this case had presented.

When Carol joined me again, I had a small sip of the new highball, then sat it on the coffee table. I was still cudgeling my brain from time to time in the hope of figuring out how I could locate detective Harry Welch. And suddenly I knew.

I'd known all along, if only my memory had functioned. But the salient information had come to me when my mind had not exactly

been screwed to the sticking point. I remembered now that while I'd been upstairs in the Grotto, talking to the shapely Neptuna, she'd mentioned that Welch had given her one of his cards. Later she'd said that she had no idea where Welch was staying. But there wouldn't have been any reason for him to leave the card unless his address had been on it.

"It's still around here someplace," she had said, I remembered now.

I grabbed the phone, looked up the Grotto in the book and dialed.

Carol said, "What bit you?"

Joe Grace answered at the Grotto. He told me Ilona was about to dive into her act, but I explained what I wanted and Grace said he'd check with her, if there was time, before the show.

"Thanks, Grace," I said. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

As I put the phone back in its cradle and got to my feet, Carol picked up my drink and walked closer to me. Then she handed me the dark highball and said, "Here. Relax and have your old bourbon."

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"Haven't got time. I'm leaving."

"Oh, Shell. You can't ply me with liquor like this and then leave."

"I didn't ply you, you asked for it. Besides, I can feel that first one too much already, and I've got work to do."

"The work can wait, can't it? Please, Shell. I'm enjoying myself."

"Sorry. I'm enjoying myself, too, but—"

"I haven't enjoyed myself so much in a long time. And my pill's wearing off."

She stepped close to me, put her arms on my shoulders and looked up at me. I had for a second there thought she probably couldn't get any closer, but I was wrong. She got quite a bit closer.

"My pill's wearing off," she said in a low, husky voice. "I can tell."

"I can tell, too. And don't forget, I haven't had any pill."

She was sort of squirming around, and her hands went up behind my neck and traced little paths of cold in my suddenly heated skin, paths like small fire-breaks in the midst of conflagration, and I came very close to weakening.

She said, "I'm so glad I met you, Shell. I don't want to let you go now."

"I'm practically gone. I mean, here I go—I'm—good-by."

The phone rang. I jumped for it and got away from Carol. It was Joe Grace again. "Scott," he said, "I just remembered you mentioning that guy who came in with Welch. The guy with the tan, and the pale blue eyes. I just saw him come in."

"He's there now? Anybody with him?"

"He came in alone. Didn't say boo to me. Went upstairs. Probably to see Ilona, but I figured I'd call you right off, seeing how you said you were anxious—"

There was undoubtedly more, but I didn't hear it. I dropped the phone onto its hook and headed for the door. Carol yelled, "But what'll I *do?* My pill *is* wearing off."

"Take another one," and out the door I went.

8

I LEFT my car in the Grotto's lot, and raced to the club's entrance and inside. The Underseas Room band was playing the weird number which introduced the show.

I ran up the back stairs three at a time and as I got to their top and ran down the hallway toward Neptuna's dressing room I saw husky Dan Thrip, in trunks, standing outside her door, apparently waiting for the musical cue that would be his signal to go in and dive into the tank. Cabot wasn't in sight anywhere.

I sprang past Thrip, opening the door and going through as he yelped, "Hey, what duh—" but then I saw Neptuna. Or rather her tail. She had just dived into the pool and was entering the water.

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And then I saw Cabot.

He must have been talking to Ilona until the moment she dived, because he was just turning toward me. Those pale blue eyes got about twice as wide as normal in his dark face when he lamped me but then they narrowed again as I jumped toward him. He balled up his fists, stepped toward me, and launched his right hand at me like a brown rock. He didn't have any intention of starting a conversation, he simply wanted to bust my skull.

But I had not been charmed by Cabot either, so I felt almost gleeful as I pulled my head slightly aside as I got close to him and that brown-rock fist, bent forward a little, and slammed the knuckles of my left hand into his stomach. Or rather, onto his stomach. It felt like I'd busted my hand. That stomach of his was like a piece of corrugated cast iron.

Cabot didn't even grunt, but his fist whispered past my ear without doing any damage. He staggered back a step, then moved around me, lips pressed together. He feinted twice with his left, then slammed his right hand at me—and he was wide open.

I bent my legs and leaned a bit to the side to let that looping right whistle past my face, then straightened up and pivoted, slammed my right fist against the side of his chin. It made a fine, a dandy noise, and he staggered backward, his arms flying up loosely in front of him.

I had him, and knew that just one more punch would settle this altercation if it wasn't already settled. And when Cabot came to, then I'd ask him all the questions about Welch, and his wife, and the other Ilonas, and the shot at me, among others.

But that hard-thrown right hand pulled me around a bit, left me a little off balance, and I moved my left foot back about six inches to steady myself. That was the wrong thing to do. My foot was resting on *nothing*.

The horrible realization swept over me even as I flailed my arms trying to regain my balance. But it was, too, and it was almost unthinkable. I gave a short hopping movement, and then I was flying backward into wetness. Wetness, and a sickening realization. My eyes were closed, but even without looking around I knew where I was.

I knew what I was, too, and it was almost unthinkable, certainly unprintable.

When I opened my eyes I could see quite well, even see the glass wall of the aquarium in which I was hanging, sort of stunned and unbelieving. I couldn't see outside, but I could imagine with dull horror the expressions fixing themselves on customers' faces out there.

Below me was Neptuna, the mermaid. She was swooping through the water and curling around a rock quite gracefully, entirely unaware of what dangled here above her

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head in wet tan slacks and a sopping brown sports coat.

Undoubtedly she had not the slightest suspicion that anybody—especially me—had yet followed her into the water, and she was looking happy, almost smiling, as she arched her back down there and started to glide up through the water.

But she spun slowly around and lamped me and her arms flew up over her head like springs, her mouth opened wide, and her legs split through the thin rubber mermaid skin as if it were Kleenex. She froze in a strained, awkward position, floating there in the water with her arms and legs akimbo, bent into the approximate shape of a swastika, and looking very much like an arthritic Balinese dancer engaged in drowning.

Then she screamed. Bubbles ripped out of her mouth like horrified silver balloons and popped up past her head. In that moment Ilona seemed to gather enormous strength from somewhere, and all of a sudden her arms and legs were moving as if she had six of each. As she shot past me, I came to my senses and took out after her.

My head popped up past the surface of the pool just as Ilona was clambering out, inches from me. Only inches. It was a sight that, unfortunately, I couldn't appreciate to the full right at that moment, but it was often going to flash back into my memory and jangle all my nervous nerves like pink lightning.

Then she was on her feet and racing away.

"Ilona!" I shouted. "Wait, it's me, Shell Scott. It's me!"

For a second I didn't think my words were likely to have any effect on her, as if the sight of me had drained her of further power to react in any way except running, but then she stopped suddenly and sort of jerked.

She quivered slightly like a woman who had stuck her finger into an electrical outlet, and slowly turned. She stabbed me with a strange, anguished gaze as I rose dripping from the water.

"Ilona," I said. "I'm—I—what can I say?"

She stared at me.

"Well," I said a bit pettishly, since I was pretty uncomfortable to begin with, "I didn't do it on purpose, you know."

There was some more silence, and finally I asked, "Did you find the card?"

"Card?" At last she spoke. Her voice was dull. "Yes, I found the card. I didn't know you wanted it so badly."

She was still staring at me.

Dan Thrip was staring at me, too. He stood outside in the hall, eyeballing me through the open doorway. His chin was hanging down two or three inches, which was about as far down as it could hang, and his long arms dangled at his sides. He was looking from one

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of us to the other, with a fixed stupidity of expression, and not a glimmer of understanding in his blank eyes.

His cue had come and gone long ago. He had heard those musical notes that said to him, *Go Into Your Act, Dan,* but somebody had changed the act. Everything was all fouled up. He was bewildered, nonplussed, unsure of himself.

The events of the last minute or so had, understandably, occupied my mind to the exclusion of everything else. Consequently I had forgotten all about Johnny Cabot. But suddenly I remembered that he should be lying without a wiggle on the floor. He wasn't even in sight.

"Dan," I said. "What happened to the guy who was in here?"

It took him a while to answer, but at last in a few, halting phrases, he indicated that a guy had come racing out past him and downstairs, very obviously in a big hurry—which told me that by now Cabot would be about a mile from here.

I started to race out after him anyway, but then stopped, knowing that chasing the man now was useless.

I said to Ilona, "What did Cabot want with you? What was he doing here?"

She had practically recovered her senses and poise by now, and she said, "It was about you, Shell. He just came in without knocking or anything and asked if you'd been in to see me. When I told him yes, he seemed real angry, started swearing and all."

Apparently Cabot had remembered telling me he'd been with a girl from the Grotto this morning, and hadn't liked the idea of my coming here. "He say anything else?"

"Yes, he told me if I saw you or heard from you again to deny that I'd been with him or ever met him. He seemed pretty worried about it."

"He would be."

"I'll get that card," Ilona said. "Don't—do anything."

Then she looked past me and seemed to notice Dan Thrip, for the first time. She slammed the door in his face. It slammed not more than two inches from his nose, but as far as I could tell he didn't move at all.

The recent events had probably put him nearly into a state of shock, but it finally dawned on me that the real push into trauma must have been his first sight of Ilona, the mermaid, without her fishtail, most of which was somewhere in the pool down below.

Only wispy segments of it still remained.

Ilona and I both stood there looking at each other and dripping, and then she chuckled. The chuckle turned into a laugh, and after a moment I joined her. When we caught our breath again, we were both back to normal.

I was so back to normal that I

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had got quite close to her indeed, and she reached up and put both hands on my shoulders. It was about the same movement that Carol had made earlier, but this time it filled me with all sorts of desires, and not one of them was the desire to leave.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world for my arms to go around her, and her fingers to tighten on my shoulders, and her parted lips to get closer to mine, and then meet them eagerly, almost harshly. It was delightful. It was also, there is no doubt, one of the sloppiest kisses in my kissing history.

We mashed together, dripping, squishing, and gurgling. Since she had almost nothing on, I was doing most of the dripping and squishing. But she was gurgling. There was really quite a bit of sound there for a minute or so, like those hi-fi records of heartbeats and joints popping. I even heard a far-off pounding.

Then I realized the pounding wasn't so far off. Somebody was running down the hall. Then I heard Dan Thrip saying, "No! You can't go in. She hasn't got no clothes on."

Ilona leaned back an inch or two and looked up at me. "Why, that's true," she breathed in mock surprise. "How could I have forgotten?"

Then she stepped back and said, smiling, "Now, don't peek," and walked slowly, beautifully, artistically, to the bamboo screen and behind it. I felt a bit weak.

In a few seconds she came into view once more, wearing that white robe again, and at almost the same instant the door burst open. Joe Grace leaped into the room, his face livid. He pointed a finger at me.

"You!" he shouted hoarsely.

9

DAN THRIP came in and grabbed Grace, who told him he was fired, but then Thrip noted that Ilona was clad in her robe and he calmed down, and Ilona cooed a few words at Joe Grace and said everything would be all right. Her robe fell slightly open as she leaned toward him, but she quickly grabbed it and pulled it together.

After that, however, when Ilona asked them to please leave, for just a little moment, they both went out meekly. During all that I managed to elicit the info from Grace that Cabot had gone tearing through the club and outside minutes ago.

As the door closed, Ilona reached into the pocket of her robe and pulled out a small white card. "I found this just before you showed up—Joe said you'd be by. Is this what you wanted?"

"Uh-huh." The name Harold Welch was printed on the card, with the word *"Investigator"* below the name. That was all, but written

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across its back was "Rancho Cottages, Cottage 12."

Ilona said, "Shell, maybe if you get all your investigating done real fast, you might get back here before closing."

"A brilliant thought, but highly unlikely."

"Well, you try, anyway. But right now you'd better go—Dan and I still have a show to do."

I shuddered. I looked down at my dripping clothes and shuddered again. A sudden pain rippled through my stomach and I bent slightly forward, wincing. Dizziness swept over me momentarily.

Ilona said, "What's the matter, Shell?"

"I don't know. Must have bent some muscles."

"You should be sprained all over."

"Maybe Cabot clobbered me when I wasn't looking. No, I understand—I swallowed some water and there wasn't any bourbon in it. The shock shattered my nervous system."

She was smiling, but I wasn't. I had barely noticed similar sensations a couple times in the last few minutes, but in the movement and excitement I'd paid no attention. I did feel a bit dizzy, but that wasn't too unusual. I told Ilona good-by and to put on a sensational act, and left.

Half an hour later, after looking up the Rancho Cottages in the phone book, I'd found the place and was talking to the sleepy owner. At first he'd ogled my wet clothes, but I told him I'd fallen into the lake at MacArthur Park and that seemed to satisfy him. The Rancho was a twelve-unit motel-type spot off Grange Street about five miles from downtown L.A. The owner, a man named Brand, said he remembered Mr. Welch, but he hadn't seen him for over a week. Welch had left word that he wasn't to be disturbed, even for maid service, unless he asked for it.

Mr. Brand went on, "I think he had a babe livin' with him."

"Oh? Who was it, do you know?"

Brand shook his head. "Not even sure there *was* a babe. But that's usually why folks don't want the maid service and all."

The cottages were separate cabins, and Brand took me to Cottage 12. He knocked, but there wasn't any answer.

"Don't think he's home," Brand told me. "Like I said, I haven't seen him around. Probably investigating somewhere—detective, you know."

"Yeah."

He looked at me in the glow of the flashlight he held. "Something the matter with you?"

"I'm all right." That sudden pain had caught me several times in the last half hour, but it was now subsiding to a dull ache that stayed with me, along with mild dizziness.

Mr. Brand opened the door, then pressed the light switch on the wall,

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saying, "I know you're a detective, but I still don't like to . . . Oh, my God!"

Looking past him, I could see the same thing Brand had seen. On our right was the open door to the bathroom, and halfway through it, sprawled on the floor, was a man's body.

I walked to the figure and touched the outflung hand. The arm moved easily, so there wasn't any rigor mortis. I guessed, though, that he'd been killed several days ago; rigor mortis could have set in and then left again, as it will after a few days. I could see the man's face, and it had the distinctively bluish tinge of cyanosis.

The dead man fitted the description I had of Harry Welch; he had a lot of dark hair, gray at the temples, and a thin black mustache, but I asked Mr. Brand, "Would you say this is Welch?"

He came a couple steps forward and bent down, peering at the dead man's face, an expression of distaste on his own features. "Yes, but what happened to him? Look at that color; it's . . ." He made a grating sound way down deep in his throat.

"Cyanosis," I said. "One of the less important effects of cyanide poisoning. You'd better call the police."

Brand went out. I could see that the wrinkled collar of the white dress shirt the dead detective wore was open, and he wore no tie. He had on brown trousers and brown shoes.

It looked as if Welch had been relaxing at night after finishing a day's work. And he had almost surely been poisoned by somebody else.

Suicide was such a remote possibility that I ignored it.

There wasn't anything to show that Welch hadn't been living here alone. I looked around for something he might have eaten or drunk from, but there wasn't anything like that in the cottage. In the dresser drawer, however, was the dead man's wallet. I flipped it open with a finger and examined the identification cards behind their transparent windows.

The dead man had been a private detective, all right, licensed by the state of California. His name was Harold M. Welch, and his address was in Fresno, California. So finally I knew where he'd come from.

Looking at the limp body on the floor, I wondered why Welch had been killed. There was one reason, or motive, that fit all facets of the case. But Welch, too, had been poisoned—with cyanide. And there had been cyanide in Ilona Cabot's milk.

I stopped. Remembering, I could hear Johnny Cabot saying to me at the Westlander Theater: "If I wanted to kill anybody, I wouldn't use cyanide, I'd use a gun." How had he known that the would-be

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murderer of his wife had used cyanide?

I thought about that, and when I remembered that Ilona had been gone by the time I'd arrived at the house on Robard Street, I felt sure I had the answer to that question—and more, including why Welch had been murdered, why there'd been the attempt on Ilona Cabot's life—in fact the whole story, including where Johnny Cabot and his three Ilonas fit in.

But I still needed a little more information and a little more proof. And the place to get it was in my apartment, and the method was using the phone to call Fresno.

Carol Austin was still waiting for me in my apartment when I got there. I'd anticipated that, and would have been enormously surprised if she hadn't waited for my return.

She didn't say anything when I walked in the door, just stared at me.

"Hi," I said. "I wondered if you'd still be here."

Only then did she smile and seem to relax. "You must have known I'd wait. What have you been doing?" Her blue eyes got very wide. "What happened to your clothes? It isn't raining, is it?"

I walked to the divan and sat down, reached for the phone. "No, I fell into a tank of water."

She asked some more questions, but instead of answering them I dialed information and asked for the phone number of Mr. William Grant in Fresno.

Carol got up and said, "I'll mix us something to drink."

"Fine," I told her. "I'd like that."

While she moved about in the kitchenette, I listened to the operator getting in touch with Fresno, then asking for the number of William Grant.

Finally a woman's sleep-dulled voice was saying to me, "Hello."

"Hello." This is Shell Scott in Los Angeles. I wasn't sure I'd reach anyone at this number."

Carol came back and sat on the divan and handed me a dark-brown highball.

"Bourbon and water, isn't it?" she whispered.

I nodded. At the other end of the line the woman was saying, "Mr. Grant passed away recently. Perhaps I can help you—I was his personal secretary for many years. I'm Joan Bates."

"What can you tell me about Mr. Harry Welch, a detective."

"Oh?" She hesitated. "I don't feel I should—"

"He's dead," I interrupted. "He was murdered. I'm an investigator, myself." I added, with only slight exaggeration, "I'm working quite closely with the police on this."

And that loosened her tongue. "I see— He's *dead*, then. We hadn't heard anything for several days. How awful! Are you sure he was murdered?"

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"There's not any doubt. What can you tell me about him?"

"Well, he was working for the estate. When Mr. Grant's will was read, we learned that he'd left half of all his money to me and his nurse Ann Wilson, and the other half to a friend. But nobody knew where the—friend was living."

"You're referrring to his daughter, arent't you?"

She gasped. "Why, how on earth did you—"

"I know all about that, ma'am. Will you excuse me a minute?"

She said she'd hold the line, and I put the phone down on the cushion, then got to my feet, highball in my hand. "Any ice left?" I asked Carol. Or, at least, the lovely I thought of as Carol.

"Yes. Yes, lots. A tray's in the sink. What—"

She started to get up, but I said genially, "Relax, honey. I can do some of the work."

10

IN THE KITCHENETTE, out of sight of my guest, I made noise getting the ice, rattling the tray in the sink, while I held the highball close to my nose and sniffed it. It was obvious, once I looked for it—or smelled for it. The peach-pit odor of potassium cyanide rose even above the strong fumes of bourbon.

I poured the drink into the sink, quickly and quietly rinsed my glass and filled it with tap water, plus enough Coca Cola to give it a dark bourbon color, then added a couple more ice cubes and went back into the front room.

Carol hadn't moved. She seemed almost rigid. I beamed at her and said, "I like lots of ice. This conversation may take quite a while."

I sat down and picked up the phone, holding my hand over the mouthpiece, then had a sizable gulp of my water-and-Coke. "That's better," I said happily, and then frowned, making a face. "But that's the bitterest bourbon I ever tasted, Carol, next time use the Old Crow not that cheap stuff."

She nodded silently and smiled. It was a ghastly smile. An hour earlier, I would probably have thought it charming, hot, lovable. But now I could see what it really was, just muscles pulling at lips and cheeks.

Into the phone I said, "Hello again. Would you give me the whole story, please?" She did.

While talking to the woman in Fresno, I sipped occasionally at my drink. When she finished, I thanked her and said I'd get in touch with her again the following day, and hung up.

Carol Austin had her big blue eyes fastened on me like blued steel to a magnet. She couldn't have learned much from the phone conversation, because for the most part I'd been listening.

But she said, "Are you getting your case all finished up, Shell?"

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"Looks like it."

She rasied her highball. "Relax a little. You'll live longer. Bottoms up?"

Live longer, hey? "Bottoms up," I said, and drank the rest of my Coke-and-water.

It was fascinating to watch Carol watch me. She didn't even seem to be breathing. I said, "Would you like to hear about the case, honey? About my fascinating life?"

She shrugged, as if that would be as good a way to kill the next minute or two as any. I said, "Some of this I'd already learned, and some of it I got on the phone from Fresno. I was talking to Fresno just now, did you know that?"

"I . . . thought maybe . . ." She stopped. "I mean, I don't know where it was."

"Well, it was Fresno. It seems a man named William J. Grant died up there a little while back, and this Mr. Grant had raked together about four million dollars. About twenty-two years ago, Mr. Grant and a girl named Mary Lassen were, well, let's say in love. Is this interesting to you?"

She gave me one of those pulled-muscle smiles again, as if she had just sprained her face. Carol knew something was very wrong, but she didn't seem sure exactly what it was. Then, too, I was dying rather slowly.

I said, "Well, to boil it down, they had a baby. And they weren't married. The old story; it's happened before, it'll happen again."

And right there I stopped. I let what I fondly hoped was a stricken look capture my features. I waggled my face around and bent forward, saying harshly, "Arrggh!"

Carol didn't move an eighth of an inch. She stared at me, and in a voice completely devoid of surprise or even friendly curiosity, asked, "What's the matter, Shell?"

"I— A pain. Feel a little dizzy. Something I . . ." After another groan or two I straightened up and shook my head. This time when I looked at Carol there was, oddly enough, an apparently real smile on her face. It was a small, hardly perceptible smile, but after all there wasn't much to laugh about.

"That was strange," I said, and went on. "Well, this guy Grant took a powder, left the Lassen woman and the child in the lurch. The woman turned the kid over to an orphanage and knocked herself off, and by the time Grant learned about that a year or so had passed. He didn't do anything about it. But after another twenty years, he took real sick. He was dying, and his thoughts turned to the girl—his daughter. He was a rich man by then, and he wanted half his for-

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tune to go to the girl. Is this boring you, Carol?"

"What? Oh, no, Shell. This is interesting."

"Fine. There's not much more. I —arrgh!"

I did it all again. Carol really seemed to enjoy this spasm and kept looking at me hopefully. But I recovered and continued, although in a weak voice.

"Well, Grant died, and the executors of the estate, in accordance with his wishes, hired a detective named Welch to find the missing daughter. All they could tell the detective was the name of the orphans' home, and the date the girl had been left there by her mother. Welch checked the home and learned the girl had been named Ilona. So he started hunting up gals named Ilona."

"Ilona?" Carol said gently. "Isn't that odd?"

"The odd part is that you asked me about Ilona Cabot earlier. And I didn't ever tell you that the homely Ilona in my office was named Cabot. I did foolishly admit to you this morning that I was looking for her husband; and you must have heard me talking to Missing Persons on the phone about a missing John *Cabot*.

"I mean when you came into my office with that spur-of-the-moment story about thinking it was Dr. Forrest's. I suppose you put one and one together and tonight asked me about Ilona Cabot to make sure that was, in fact, her married name."

Carol didn't say anything. I went on, "Well, to continue, nobody around the late Mr. Grant even knew he had a daughter until the will was read. That's understandable, under the circumstances. Anyway, all his money was left to just three people. Two of them in Fresno—Grant's personal secretary, and his private nurse, both of whom had been with him for years. He had no other relatives, so half his estate went to those two. The other half was to go to his daughter. And that, of course, set up a kind of dangerous situation for this Ilona."

"Oh? I—don't understand," said Carol.

What she probably didn't understand was why I was still able to yak away, but I went on, "Nobody knew for sure if this Ilona was still alive. If found, she would inherit a couple million dollars. But if nobody found her—or if she were dead—according to the terms of the will the two million would then devolve upon the secretary and nurse. That's an extra million bucks apiece. There's a nice motive for murder—murder for a million. So it looks as if either Grant's secretary or his nurse tried to knock off Ilona. It's really too bad what the hunger for money will do to otherwise nice people."

Carol was looking at me strangely, in apparent puzzlement. I

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hadn't gasped and gurgled for quite a while, and probably she felt that I was taking a distressingly long time to die. So I went into my dying-horribly act.

Suddenly I gasped twice as loud and gurgled much more musically then anything I'd achieved yet. I sprang to my feet and straightened up, then bent forward like a man doing a jackknife, arms going around my stomach. I spun about, staggering, toppled forward almost at Carol's feet, and continued groaning while writhing on the carpet.

Carol didn't extend a helping hand, didn't say a word, didn't do a thing. In momentary glimpses that I got of her from my rolling eyes, I saw that she had merely put her arms across her breasts, hands clasping her shoulders, and was gently hugging herself. Her narrowed blue eyes were fixed on me, and that tight little smile twisted her soft red lips.

Finally I got to my hands and knees and raised my face so I could stare at her. "You!" I croaked. "You've croaked me!"

Her eyes were bright. She squinted at me, pressing against the divan as if to move farther from me. I said, "It was you, Carol. You killed Welch—and tried twice to kill Ilona."

She got to her feet and started to step around me. This wasn't the way I'd planned it. So, in what must have appeared my final burst of living, I struggled to my feet and staggered toward Carol.

Her eyes widened, a little fright showing in them at last. Because she must have thought I would by now be unable to move with much grace or speed, she spun around to run, too late. I jumped about six feet through the air and grabbed her, turned her to face me, and mashed her tightly against me.

"Tell me the truth!" I shouted as we both toppled to the floor.

Her face was only about three inches from mine, and she really looked frightened now. "Yes," she half whispered. "I did kill him. I couldn't let him tell where she was. And I tried to kill her—but I didn't, I didn't kill her. Let me go. Let me go!"

I just squeezed her tighter. We were lying on our sides on the thick shag nap of my carpet, and I couldn't very well have been holding her more tightly. Her breasts mashed against me, her thighs pressed mine, and she was after all a very delightfully fashioned female. She was moving a lot, too. And I wasn't really dying. In fact, I was living.

I said, "You tried to kill her with a car last Sunday, and then by lacing her milk with cyanide this morning. Didn't you?"

"Yes, yes!"

"And you were much surprised when Ilona came out of her house alive. So you followed her to my office this morning, right, love?"

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She nodded. All of this wallowing about had sort of upped my blood pressure. After those last two words, Carol hadn't said anything else, but every second she was straining against me, moving frantically, squirming and trying to get away, and it was almost enough all by itself to kill a man. I'm only human. Pretty quick I even forgot what questions I'd been meaning to ask this gal.

And, inevitably, Carol finally got my message. Her face went through a startling array of expressions. First, a queer kind of amazement. A sort of "Can this be?" look, as though it were too soon for rigor mortis to be setting in. And then the expression of a person slowly, and with complete awareness of what was happening, experiencing apoplexy. And then, at last, Carol's much-used sexy look.

She had me pegged. Hell, I had her pegged, too. But she knew what old Shell Scott was interested in. She knew, all right. And she figured, I guess, that she could take advantage of my interest in hers. At any rate, she began speaking to me, softly.

"What if I did kill that detective, Shell? What difference does it make, really? We can have a lot of fun together, you and I. I'll be rich, Shell, rich. Millions, millions of dollars. For both of us."

She was still squirming, wriggling around there on the carpet. But she wasn't trying to get away. "Once

Ilona's taken care of," she said, "I'll have two million dollars—maybe even more later. We'll have to get rid of her husband, too. I didn't even know until this morning that she was married."

She paused. "Shell, if we can get rid of both of them, there'll maybe be four million later. That's more money than I can imagine—but it was supposed all to be mine. Bill said once that it would all be mine."

For a second or two that "Bill" puzzled me, but then I realized she must have referred to Grant, William Grant as I knew him. Maybe she and Bill had played games on carpets, or had some less unusual arrangement. Carol's face wasn't frightened any longer, it was only an inch or two from mine, and she was smiling again. The smile, though, was still that pulled-muscle operation. She looked not quite all

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there, as if mentally she were absent, or at least tardy.

She went on, speaking softly, "I know you like me. I can tell when a man likes me."

"Welch, for example? He must have liked you pretty well. You were living with him at those Rancho cottages, weren't you?"

"For a little while, but I had to be close to him so I'd know when he found Ilona. If he found her."

"He didn't know you were Ann Wilson, did he?" I held my breath, but she answered without any hesitation.

"Of course not. I made up a name for him. I managed to meet him in a bar. It's a good thing. He'd even written up his report before he told me he'd finished what he'd been hired to do. That he'd found the girl he was looking for. After I—after he died, I burned the report. That's how I learned where Ilona was."

"And were you the one who shot at me earlier tonight?"

"Shot at you? I don't know what you're talking about."

I believed her. She was quiet for seconds, then she put her cheek against mine and said, in a pleased voice that was almost laughing, "You do like me a lot, I know. And we will have fun together, won't we? You won't tell anybody about me, will you, Shell?"

"Baby, we are off to the clink."

It didn't penetrate for a few moments. Then she pulled back her head and stared at me. "What? What did you say?"

"Honey, that second drink you made me earlier—the one you mixed all by yourself in the kitchenette—had enough poison in it to kill me for sure. I was just another Welch who might upset your plans. Luckily I had only a small sip of the drink, but even so, it affected me a little after I'd left here. I just can't afford to do any more drinking with you, sweet. You must have brought eight pounds of cyanide down here from Fresno."

"Oh, you're imagining things, Shell." Yeah, she was nuts, all right. "I wouldn't do anything to hurt you." Man, she was squirming and wobbling around like really crazy.

"No, of course not," I said pleasantly. "I didn't realize quite what was wrong until I saw Welch's body, and the blue tinge of cyanosis on his face. That told me what was wrong with me, my love, and who was responsible for it all. That was the dead giveaway. No, love, I'm afraid I'll have to take you to jail."

And this time she believed me. She hauled off and hit me with everything she had—that is, everything she hadn't already hit me with. Arms, elbows, head, knees and so on. She even tried to bite me.

I finally had to tie her arms and legs with electrical cord from one of the living-room lamps.

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11

THE POLICE had taken Ann Wilson, alias Carol Austin, away from my apartment an hour before, and I was just knocking at the door of apartment 12 in the Franklin. While waiting for the police to arrive, the Franklin's desk clerk had phoned to earn his twenty bucks, and report the arrival of Cabot and his wife. So I had come straight here as soon as I could; this would wrap the case up.

I hated the thought of what the truth was going to do to Ilona. Johnny wasn't going to be happy, either, so I took out my .38 Colt and held it ready in my hand as I waited.

Footsteps sounded inside, then the door opened part way. Johnny Cabot blinked sleepily at me and began to speak. But then his eyes snapped open, he started to slam the door as a swear word burst from his throat.

"Hold it, Cabot!" I shoved the gun toward his sharp nose, and he froze. He stared at the gun, inches from his face, and I said, "Ask me in, Cabot. The party's over."

"What the hell's the idea? I've had about—"

"Shut up. You going to ask me in?"

He glanced again at my coat pocket, then stepped back. I walked in and looked around. The door into the next room, the bedroom, was ajar. From the bedroom Ilona's voice called, "What is it, Johnny?"

"I'll—be right in," he said, then looked at me.

I spoke softly, "Get her and bring her out here, Cabot. I'll do this much for you, though I don't know why—you can tell her if you want to; or I will. You can have your choice."

He licked his lips. "Tell her what?"

"Come off it. You're washed up. I know all about William Grant, your bride's inheritance, the works."

He sighed, then shrugged. "Well," he said finally, "you can't blame me for trying. You—uh, you better tell her, Scott. She is pretty much of a mess, but—well, I don't want to tell her."

"I didn't think anything would bother you, Cabot." He shrugged, and I said, "Tell her to come out. But you keep in my sight. I'd hate for you to come back with that forty-five in your mitt."

"What forty-five?"

"The one you shot at me with earlier tonight."

He started to deny it, but then walked to the door and told Ilona to put on some clothes and come out. Then he shut the door, walked over and said to me, "I guess there's no point in trying to make it work now. Sure, I shot at you—or at your car. Don't kid yourself, mister. If I'd wanted to plug you, I wouldn't have missed by three or

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four feet. I just wanted to scare you off me and Ilona."

He paused. "Maybe I should have shot you—but I'm not a murderer."

This time I believed him. I put the .38 in my coat pocket but kept my hand on it and said, "I figured you were for awhile, Cabot. I found Welch's body tonight—"

"He's dead?"

Honest surprise was sharp in his voice.

"Several days. Poisoned, I thought you might have done it, but under the circumstance you'd have been nuts to kill him. You wanted him alive—at least long enough to report to Fresno that he'd found Ilona. But because you'd told me at the Westlander you wouldn't use cyanide to kill somebody, I figured you must've slipped the cyanide into your wife's milk."

"You're way off," he said. "The minute after you talked to me at the Westlander I called Ilona, asked her what the score was. She told me about bringing the milk to your office, cyanide and all. She told me."

"Uh-huh. That's the way it figured to me."

"Welch's been dead several days? You mean they don't know Ilona's here in L.A." He grinned wryly. "Not that it makes any difference to *me* now."

He was almost likeable for a second there. Cabot talked freely enough, now that he knew the game was over.

As I had guessed, he'd first talked to Welch on the 15th when the detective came into the Westlander Theater to check on Ilona the Hungarian Hurricane. Cabot had learned enough from Ilona and Welch himself that he stuck to Welch like a leech. They'd visited the Grotto, where Welch had interviewed Neptuna—and Cabot had got an eyeful that almost knocked him off his feet.

He and Welch had planned to have dinner the next night, but Welch had phoned to say he'd found the girl he was looking for and thus couldn't arrange to make it.

I said, "How much did Welch tell you? Did he actually say the Ilona he'd found was going to inherit a couple million? Did he tell you where she lived?"

Cabot shrugged. "No, he just said she was going to get some money from the estate of a guy named William J. Grant—he didn't tell Ilona that; his job was only to find her. I knew Welch was from Fresno, checked recent Fresno papers and learned this Grant had been loaded. The next day when Welch phoned me, I asked him where he'd found the girl and he said in an insurance office on Hill. I didn't ask him to narrow it down. The rest of it was just a little checking here and with Fresno."

He shrugged again. "A couple

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million bucks was worth a good try."

"What I can't understand is why you took off Monday night and didn't come back."

"Well, you've seen my . . . wife. And you've seen Ilona Betun. I thought I could get away with it."

That was a good enough answer. Cabot told me that he'd kept his job at the burlesque house because he wasn't supposed to know his Ilona was going to inherit any money, and it would later have looked funny if he had quit his job as soon as they'd met. Besides, he added dully, they really did need the money.

The door opened then and Ilona Cabot came in. Wearing her husband's robe, and with no makeup, her hair almost straight, she didn't look good at all. Not pretty, at least. She still had that air of mousy sweetness about her.

Her face brightened with a smile when she saw me. "Mr. Scott. What are you doing here?"

"Hello, Mrs. Cabot. You'd better sit down."

We all found seats, me in a chair and Ilona with Johnny on the couch. She grabbed his hand and held it. Johnny was starting to look very uncomfortable.

Just to be positive, I asked her if she'd spent the first half dozen years of her life in the Bunting Orphanage, and if a detective named Welch had talked to her a couple weeks ago about that. After a little hesitation she admitted it, but expressed her puzzlement.

I said, "Well, Mrs. Cabot, you're an heiress. I mean, you'll soon inherit about two million dollars."

It went right by her. If I was talking about two million dollars, I couldn't possibly be talking about her. It took me five minutes to partially convince her that she was actually going to get money, and explain enough so she could believe it.

When she finally got it through her head, all she did was turn to Cabot and say, "Johnny, isn't it wonderful?"

I broke in quickly, "Wait a minute. That's not all of what I've got to tell you. The other part is about your husband. About Johnny."

She smiled. "Yes?" She looked at Johnny Cabot. She beamed at him.

I remembered how she had lit up in my office when I'd asked her to describe her husband. This was the same kind of look. A bright, happy, real everything's-wonderful look. It wasn't a very new expres-

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sion, not original, just the look of a woman in love.

But it was, of course, new for Ilona.

I hated to think of how she was going to look when she knew that Johnny Cabot had found out about her from Welch, learned from Welch about her inheritance, found her and rushed her and married her, just for whatever part he could grab of that two million bucks. I didn't like the thought of what was going to happen to her already plain and homely face.

I said, "You see, Mrs. Cabot, this detective, Welch, who talked to you—well, he talked to some other Ilonas first, before he found you. During his search for you. Two million dollars is an awful lot of money, and . . ."

I stopped. It was difficult to find the right words. It was going to hurt enough, no matter how it was told, but I wanted to find the gentlest way to break it to her, if I could.

But then Cabot said slowly, "Let it go, Scott. This is something I . . . Well, maybe I better tell her." He chewed on his lip for a moment, then turned to her. "Honey, it's like this: When I met you, I —well, I—"

Ilona was looking up at him, sort of smiling. And it seemed to me that she didn't look plain and almost ugly—not when she was looking at her husband. Her face seemed to get bright and warm, as if it were lighted from happiness welling up inside her, and I thought that all the hunger and trampled-down love and affection she must have been saving for years was right there on her face.

It was there in the brightness of her eyes, and in the curve of her lips. It was so frank and honest and open that it didn't seem quite right for me to be looking at her then.

Johnny had taken a deep breath, and now he said, rapidly, not looking at her, "Honey, when I met you I told you I was crazy about you, you remember, but the real reason I bumped into you was because I knew all about—"

"Wait a minute. Hold it, just a minute."

I was on my feet and the words had popped out of me almost involuntarily. All I knew was that I didn't want to see Ilona's face change from the expression it now wore to one of hurt and disillusionment. Or maybe I was just out of my mind.

But, anyway, I went on in a rush, "I can't sit around here all night listening to you two gab away. This is probably the same thing your husband said to me just a little while ago when I told him about the money you're inheriting. He said he was afraid you might not feel the same toward him, now that you're a millionaire."

"Johnny!" she cried. She was shocked.

I went on, "What I wanted to

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tell you about was the other half of the job you hired me for. Somebody really was trying to kill you, Mrs. Cabot. It was a woman named Ann Wilson. She was scheduled to inherit a million herself, but that wasn't enough for her, so she tried to knock you off. I think she's a little cracked—anyway, the cops have her in the hoosegow now, so all your troubles are over. Funny, you'll probably inherit half of the million she would have gotten."

"All my troubles are over," she said softly. "I just can't understand it—all this at once."

Neither could Cabot. He was gaping at me, his mouth half open. I walked to the door and out into the hall, then I jerked my head at him.

"I'd like to have a last word with you, Cabot."

He came outside and shut the door. "What the hell?" he said, bewildered. "What happened just now?"

"I had a cerebral hemorrhage. Shut up and listen. That little girl in there must be crazier than Ann Wilson, because she thinks you're the end. Well, I think you're the other end, but maybe you could be real nice to this Ilona-with-two-million-dollars, if you tried. And I've got a hunch you're going to try."

He nodded slowly. "Yeah. You're making sense." He paused. "I didn't think you were flipping your lid in there for me."

I said, "I can still tell her, you know. I can still prove it. I'd hate to tear apart two people so much in love, though."

"You know," he said quietly, "she's really prettier now than when I met her. Not pretty—but less horrible."

"Wait'll she gets that inheritance. She'll be beautiful."

I was being sarcastic, in a way, but somehow I had a hunch that Ilona—with a lot more love, and a little more money—just might work her way up to not-half-bad. Well, time would tell.

I nodded at Johnny Cabot and said, "Tell your wife I'll be sending her a bill for my fee. My *big* fee."

I walked down the hall. Before I reached the elevator I heard the door shut behind me. When I looked around, the door was closed and Johnny Cabot was again alone with his wife. . . .

Because I kept wondering about Johnny and his Ilona even after I got in the Cad and started home, I was well out Beverly Boulevard and actually passing the Grotto before I remembered the other Ilona, Neptuna. *My* Ilona.

I slammed on the breaks so suddenly that the car skidded to a stop in the middle of the street. A quick glance at the dash clock showed me it was three A.M. What was it Ilona Betun had said? She'd asked me to come back if I could, and said she would wait around a

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little while after closing. After two A.M. Well, it was only an hour after two.

Maybe she'd still be here.

I swung into the parking lot, parked the car and trotted to the club's rear entrance. With mild surprise I discovered that I was grinning. My Ilona had also said, I remembered, that sometimes she had a little swim all by herself here after everybody else had gone.

I paused before the Grotto's rear door to catch my breath, then put my hand on the knob. It turned easily and the door opened. Inside, the club was dark. I could see nothing but blackness beyond the door. But the fact that this door had been unlocked was encouraging, I thought.

Either the club was being burglarized, or Ilona was waiting. I went in, shut the door behind me, and walked ahead, still grinning, through the darkness.

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The Exterminators

by ERIC CORDER

Alone, in secret, three men worked. Their dread mission —to exterminate all living crime lords like vermin!

MANDETTI'S was six blocks from the offices of Wolfe, Cudahay & Wolfe. It was a small restaurant with an excellent cusine and incredibly slow service. When

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George felt, as he did today, the need to absent himself from the formal atmosphere of Wolfe, Cudahay & Wolfe, and to study a difficult case over a leisurely bottle of Chianti, he snapped his briefcase shut and went to *Mandetti's* for a three-hour lunch.

The briefs on *Kyrandopolis versus the Port of New York Authority* were long and complicated, but for the several million dollars at stake the firm would have threaded its way through a paper labyrinth three times again as large.

George had been working for half an hour, annotating with tight little marginal notes, when someone slid into the opposite side of the booth. He looked up, annoyed at the interruption.

"Mel!" He shoved aside the folder and reached for the hand that was extended to him. "Where the hell have you been?"

The man across from him winced. "No need to shout."

"But what—"

"Please." Mel raised his hand and made a pushing gesture.

George shook his head. "Okay, but you don't walk in on a guy who's been trying for a month to find out whether you're dead or alive and expect him to give you a polite nod." George slid his glasses higher up on his nose. "By the way, which are you?"

Mel laughed—a short nervous sound. "Come on. It can't be that bad."

"Ever hear of sleep? Clears up the little red road maps in your eyes. Does all sorts of interesting things. Even more effective when you use food along with it."

"So I've heard. George, I have something—"

George signaled the waitress. "Miss."

"No! I didn't come here to—"

"Hey, buddy. Take it easy. You're not going to last long without eating."

"Later—I'll eat later. I have to talk to you."

"So we can talk over lunch."

Mel slammed his first onto the table. "I don't want—"

The waitress, swarthy, heavy, smiling as if every customer banged the table preparatory to ordering, poised her pencil. "Yes?"

Mel pressed his lips together.

"All right," he said quietly.

"Lasagna. Bring me a baked lasagna."

"And what would you like to drink?"

"Nothing."

"We have some very fine wines."

He jerked his head up and grimaced.

"Ambrosia," he said. "Ambrosia in a silver chalice!"

"I'm sorry, but I don't think—"

"Hemlock, then! Anything!"

She smiled vacantly down at him, undaunted. "We have Burgundy and—"

"Yes, yes!"

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Fulfilled, she scribbled on her pad and turned away.

George stared at Mel, whose white-knuckled hands were tightly clenched. "Mel, I'll call the office and tell them I won't be back. Let me take you home. Charlotte has been going mad. Not a letter, not a postcard. Get a good night's rest—"

Mel spoke with a tense and precise enunciation. "I don't want to eat. I don't want to go home. I don't want to see my wife and I don't want to sleep. I want to talk to you. I've been trying for three days. Tuesday you went to the *Bull and Bear*, Wednesday to *Ad Lib*, Thursday *Longchamps*. Today is the first time you've been alone."

"You followed me for three days?"

"Yes. Now will you listen?"

"Go ahead."

"It's a plot."

"Novel? Play?"

"Novel. I've got it worked out in detail, plus some seventy pages of notes—scenes, character sketches, you know. The whole bit."

"And for this you just up and disappeared for six weeks? Charlotte waited almost three weeks before she—"

"George. Don't lecture me. Just listen to the story. Comment on it, ask questions if you want, but don't say anything that isn't pertinent to the story. All right?" Mel's hands opened, fingers wide-spread and rigid, then tightened, then opened—

"One condition. When you're done, you listen to what I have to say."

"Agreed." Mel ran his tongue over his lips and leaned forward. "Crime, George, organized crime. I sketch the history indirectly, by reference, bits of pointed dialogue. Nothing new in the technique—actually the style is unimportant.

"You know the background. Sicily, the Mafia, Italian exodus to the States, Prohibition, numbers, white-slavery, narcotics. Anybody who owns a television set knows the score. Then, a little less familiar, because, with a few bloody exceptions, it didn't make for slam-bang shoot-'em-up hot copy, the spread into legit and semi-legit business—liquor, pin ball machines, unions, night clubs, etcetera.

If it weren't for an occasional scandal, gang-killing, or an election year, the public never heard anything about it. Millions of dollars, George. So many millions that it couldn't be counted. A huge, sucking parasite, that's what organized crime had become. Insatiable, uncontrollable. And why couldn't we stop it?"

Mel's eyes were wide, glazed with the film of a mystic communing with some inner vision. He was perspiring. "First, it was damn near impossible to show the public just where and for how much they were being taken. These boys were clever. A crack research team

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would spend months unraveling the threads in a simple highway appropriation, and in the end, when they almost had it, a single file would disappear from the records. Corporations, mysterious backers, anonymous campaign donations.

"How could you pin it down? Where did it start? Where did it end? Bureaucracies, red tape, legal documents, contracts, sub-contracts—who needed machine-guns and dynamite? Sure, the old tactics were still there, but just as insurance. If somebody did manage to hack their way through to the facts, there was always the bribe, the privately owned judge, the muscle, the dead witness.

"It would have been funny if it all weren't so horrible. Every now and then the government would run an investigation. What did they accomplish? A couple of token sacrifices and maybe one of the big boys jugged for income tax evasion. *We are fighting crime,* the government said, modestly and with great dedication, *watch us on your local T.V. station.* 'See them invoke the Fifth. Hear repentants testify. See Justice and the American Way triumph.' Oh, we triumphed all right. We slapped their hands and said, 'Naughty, naughty, musn't do.'

"They laughed at us, laughed until their guts ached and the tears were running down their cheeks. And they had every right to. The sword we were waving had a rubber blade. It was tragic, it was outrageous, it was idiotic. We knew who they were, every one of them. We had rooms filled with dossiers so fat they could hardly be carried. They were guilty of every crime in the books and they were as immune as any diplomat."

Mel paused when the waitress appeared. He sat, breathing deeply, abstracted, conscious of her only on the periphery of his mind. When she left, he pushed aside the lasagna and continued with heightened intensity.

"We'd reached the height of impotency. We were blind, deaf, crippled. But then something began to happen. It started in the late sixties, maybe ten years ago, subtle, slow, deadly. What's the status of organized crime—the big operation, the multi-million dollar stuff —today?"

"Minimal," George said.

"That's understating it. Less than one-twelfth of what it was in 1966, and decreasing almost by the hour.

"So?"

"*So!* Did you ever wonder why?"

"Mel, Dryden goes over all that in *The Age of Affluence,* A. J. Levine, Crown, half a dozen of them have explored it in detail. Any third-year sociology student can give you a cross-referenced analysis of it."

"Sure, sure, I've read them all. Affluence, nice word. Very socio-

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logical. 'The Automation Acceleration,' that's Crown's. You can name half a dozen of them; I can name hundreds, all saying the same thing. Very pat. Point, counter-point. Cause, effect. So simple. So logical.

" 'The anti-social, or criminal element will, after the accumulation of large amounts of capital, adopt those attitudes and values of his society that best enable him to safely accrue greater wealth, while attempting to gain the recognition and acceptance of that society.' Crown's theorem." Mel stopped. He drained the wine glass in one gulp, then looked at George.

"Suppose, just suppose for a moment, that the sociologists have blundered. That they've confused cause and effect, that increased affluence does not decrease any but the singular type of crime—the bank heist, the hi-jack, etcetera. Large scale crime, the syndicate stuff, keeps right on growing, in fact outstrips the national economy by miles, because it's not tied down by income taxes, anti-trust laws and the like.

"We've already admitted that the big shots of the underworld were virtually immune to any type of prosecution. So what happened? You really think they had a divine revelation, liquidated their empires, gave the proceeds to charity, and donned sackcloth? A sudden craving for respectability? Why worry about the respect of your community when you *own* your community?

"All right. Suppose, one night in 1965 when the take of organized crime was at its peak, that some mobster and his bodyguard are gunned down as he's parking his car. Nothing dramatic. Just a single thirty-eight slug through each of their heads. Standard gangkilling. Police run a token investigation. Syndicate does its own leg work. Nobody comes up with an answer. So the empty slot is filled by someone else, and in a month the whole thing is forgotten.

"A couple of weeks later, in another city, somebody else gets it, same way. The pattern starts. It's slow, it's quiet. It takes the syndicate a couple of years to realize what's happening. Then one day it hits them. Bit by bit, in a very thorough and methodical way, organized crime is being lobotomized. Simple, isn't it? Remove the brain and the whole network will fall to pieces.

"It's foolproof. There's a small squad. Two dozen men are more than enough. They're average guys. One's a salesman in New York. Maybe another one is a history prof at some small college in Ohio, and so on. They have no idea who their fellow members are, they get a call maybe three or four times a year, pack a bag for a business trip, a weekend holiday, a visit to a friend's. The only thing that makes them any different

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from you or me is that they pack a thirty-eight Special with a small but effective silencer in between their dress shirts."

Mel leaned forward. "Well, what do you think?"

"To be honest, I think you'd be better off if you dumped the whole thing."

"Why?" It was a demand, not a question.

"Mel, you're a good writer. You've done some fine things. But this is far beneath your capabilities. It's junk—fanciful, but junk nonetheless."

"Fanciful! Look, this isn't some light little fantasy I dreamed up. I've got hours of research in on it. I tell you that not only is it possible, it's probable. What kind of logic do you want? Billions of dollars gushing down the drain? Truth, Justice and the American Way a personal shield for men who broke every law as often as you shaved?

"So somebody—two, three, four men, who knows?—Someone in Washington finally faces up to the facts. Ideas, investigations, suggestions filter on down. Nobody but the silent three really knows what's happening. Army records, civil service records, college records are culled, psychological profiles studied until finally in a memo pad a name is written, then another. and another.

"It wasn't done overnight, but it was done. And the possible candidates were cultivated, promoted, felt out over a long period, then approached. It wasn't often they picked the wrong man, but if they did—well at this level it wasn't hard to insure against repercussions.

"In the end, they had what they wanted—two dozen men ready to fight the underworld with its own weapons, intelligent enough to realize that the only way to preserve the ideals they believed in was to violate those ideals, who loved their country enough to set aside its ethics in order to defend it."

"You mean government killers."

"Damn it, no! Exterminators. Vermin destroyers. And you can stop looking like your morality has been offended. This whole thing transcends morality. At least they thought it did."

George stared into his wine glass for a moment, then said, "Drop it, Mel. Forget about it."

"I won't forget about it." Mel's voice was tight. "I tell you that this is the only way it makes sense. What the hell is the matter with you? Why won't you see it?"

"You asked me to listen and tell you what I thought. So I listened. It's absurd. Mel, look at yourself. You're half crazy with this thing. For your own good, get rid of it. Destroy the manuscript and throw it out of your mind."

Mel drew back from the table,

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pushing himself into the cushion of the booth, and narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"Because it's not a story to you any more; you're living the thing and it's driving you nuts. We've been friends for a long time, so don't get upset. But I know a good psychiatrist—"

"Psychiatrist!"

"Look, I don't think you're crazy. But if you keep on like this—"

"No."

George sighed. "Okay, maybe I'm an alarmist." They sat in silence for a moment, then George said, "Excuse me a minute, I'm out of cigarettes. I'll be back."

Mel nodded. He was staring at the napkin dispenser. In the polished silver surface he watched the distorted reflection of George's back, saw him pause at the corner of the L-shaped restaurant and glance back at the booth, then round the corner, moving not toward the cigarette counter, but toward the spot, if Mel remembered correctly, occupied by a phone booth.

Two minutes later, George returned.

"Sorry," he said, opening a fresh pack of cigarettes. "A few people ahead of me."

Mel's hands were in his lap, his back was straight, but his head was lowered. "Who did you call, George?"

"Call?"

"Yes," he asked. "Who?"

"I—all right. Charlotte."

"Charlotte?"

"Sorry, Mel. I had to. Why don't we have some coffee? It'll take her half an hour."

"I'm sorry too, George. I thought I could make you see it."

"Maybe we should talk about something else."

"No, I can't stay any longer."

George's voice was low, firm. "Mel, you're not going anywh . . ."

There was a quick little sound from beneath the table, like that of compressed air suddenly released.

George's eyes distended. His jaw worked without sound.

Still hidden, Mel's hands returned the .38 Special—elongated by the silencer—to the manuscript folder in his lap. There were tear lines on his cheeks.

"Why wouldn't you listen?" he asked, almost inaudibly. "If you had believed me and taken the papers, it wouldn't have made any difference if they'd found me. It's wrong—no matter what it accomplishes, it's wrong. And I have to stay alive until *somebody* listens."

George's head slumped lifelessly. Mel reached across the table, gently pushed him back in the seat, then arranged the legal briefs so it appeared as if George were studying them.

He rose, was unable to suppress a shudder, then walked toward the exit, his body taut.

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DARLING,

He was charming, handsome, everything a woman could ask for in a man. Everything—and maybe a little bit more. Three dead women could have given testimony to that.

A CHILLING SUSPENSE THRILLER

by FLETCHER FLORA

TWO MONTHS after her honeymoon Ivy Andrews became convinced that she had married a murderer.

This in itself was disturbing enough, but it wasn't, in Ivy's opinion, the worst of it by far. The worst of it, from Ivy's somewhat biased point of view, was that her husband clearly planned to kill again, and that his intended victim, just as clearly, was no one but Ivy.

This made it personal. Ivy had no curiosity about the delights of heaven, being quite satisfied with the comforts of earth; her most earnest wish was to die naturally in the quite remote future. Therefore, she felt betrayed by her new husband's homicidal intention, not to say aggrieved and frightened, and she couldn't for the life of her understand why he wasn't happy with things as they were, which seemed to her about as good as things could be.

She had known, when she married him, of course, that he was lazy and greedy and riddled with faults, but she had failed to gauge the true depth of his depravity. It was too bad, too. He was so young and gay and altogether charming. It was simply a shame that he couldn't properly appreciate a wife who was young and lovely and rich and prepared to be generous.

His name was Booth. Booth Andrews. This seemed to Ivy such an absurd name, as if it were inverted or something, that it actu-

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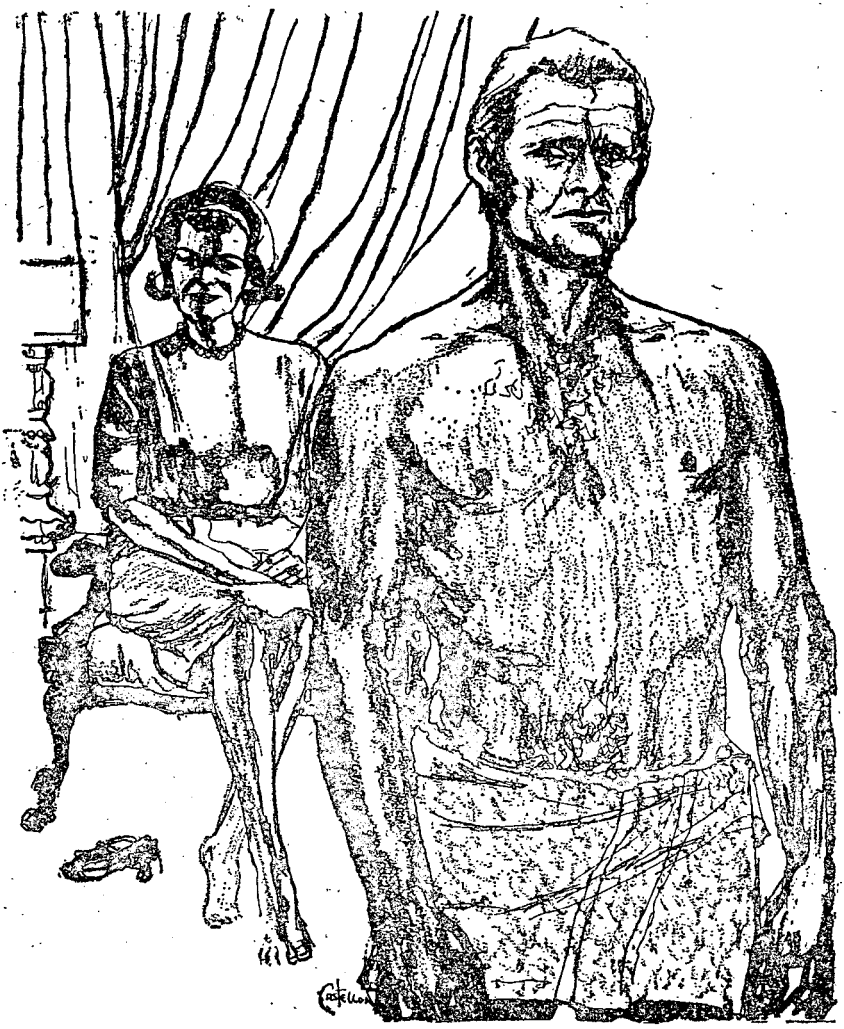
YOU DESERVE ME



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ally became a kind of fascination adding to his charm, which was already great enough to snare any reasonably susceptible woman, which she certainly was.

She hadn't intended to marry him, to tell the truth, and their honeymoon had only started out to be a vacation. After meeting, however, it hadn't taken them long to develop the idea that one could be both, and that it would surely be convenient and exciting if one were. It was, to trace it back to its beginning, all the fault of Jill Little.

Jill lived next door, on Windham Road. That wasn't quite as congested as it sounds, for Windham Road was lived on in expensive houses, and next door was usually at least a hundred feet away on both sides.

Jill lived at least a hundred feet away on the east side. She had lived next door on the east for two years before Ivy began living next door on the west. She and Ivy had quickly become friends as well as neighbors, mainly because Leo, Jill's husband, was the friend of Lewis, who was Ivy's.

That may sound like bigamy, but it wasn't. Ivy had had two husbands, but she had them legally in order. Lewis was the first and Booth was second. Lewis was considerably older than Ivy—about ten years—but this only made him thirty-two when he married and thirty-four when he died, and so it may be said that he died young, if not unexpectedly.

As a matter of fact, his health had always been precarious, to say the least, and his death was no great surprise. A serious case of rheumatic fever, survived in his childhood, had impaired his heart. He was found dead in bed by Ivy one morning.

Jill was truly wonderful in that traumatic time, understanding and kind. She kept saying what a blessing it was that Ivy and Lewis had slept in twin beds instead of a double. It was a blessing also that Lewis was rich and had made Ivy so. Otherwise, it is hardly likely, whatever Ivy's physical charms, that Booth Andrews would later have been available.

After Lewis's funeral, which Ivy attended as chief mourner in a little black hat with veil attached and a simple black dress that made her look at once sad and demure and sexy, there followed a period of approximately a year during which the young widow lived almost in seclusion in the big house on Windham Road. It was not that her sorrow had drained her of gas, for it hadn't.

But Lewis had been, after all, a kind and considerate husband, although somewhat deficient in certain respects, and it seemed to her that he ought to be entitled to some sort of posthumous recognition for it. Besides, he had left her, in addition to the house and its

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contents, a great many valuable personal affects, including more than a million dollars.

She did not remove herself entirely from society. In fact, she lived quite happily from day to day. Mrs. Matson, an ample lady of voluble cheeriness, came in six days a week to make a pass at the cleaning and cooking and to engage her mistress in random chats intended to elevate the spirits. Mrs. Matson was also a widow, a tempered veteran in the role.

Besides the amiable domestic, there were friends who called and were received. The most constant of these was Jill Little, who came over most afternoons in time for a couple of cocktails.

It was Jill, exercising her perogative as a friend and neighbor, who finally suggested that Ivy had surely made a proper concession to widowhood. The suggestion came at an opportune time, for the truth of the matter was that Ivy was beginning to get restless.

She had even found herself, recently, humming the little tune with the lyrics that expounded the advantages of having a man around the house. Jill, on the sofa in Ivy's living room, tucked up her legs, accepted a martini, and looked at Ivy speculatively over the edge of the glass.

"Darling," she said, "would you mind if I said something personal?"

"Not at all," Ivy said. "I wish you would."

"Well, I don't want to sound rude or anything, but don't you honestly think that you've done the widow bit to death?"

"I'm beginning to, now that you mention it."

"There's no sense in going on with it, if you ask me. I know that Lewis was a dear, and you've only wanted to show proper respect for him and all that, but you can hardly be expected at your age to renounce the world. You are far too pretty for that, and besides, thanks to Lewis, far too valuable."

"Lewis was very generous, I admit that."

"I am personally acquainted with several men who literally drool at the thought of you."

"I'm not sure, however, that I want to get married again," Ivy said thoughtfully.

"Nonsense. You're certainly not going to let yourself go to waste. It would be an absolute shame. Anyhow, you've scarcely been married yet. Lewis had many virtues, as we all know, but I suspect that he was also somewhat inadequate."

"Lewis was not well."

"I know," Jill said. "But now he is worse than that. To put it bluntly, he's dead, and you would be wise to accept it."

"Perhaps I shall. I've been thinking about going away for a vacation."

"That's a splendid idea. A change would do you good. Where are you thinking about going?"

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"I'm not sure yet. I'll tell you when I am."

PARIS WAS WHERE Ivy went, as she'd planned from the beginning, and when she went from Paris to London, quite a while later, she was followed closely by Booth Andrews, who had somehow scraped up the necessary money for the trip.

Booth was living in Paris, although Ivy couldn't quite understand how he managed. Sometimes he talked about writing, and sometimes he talked about painting, but it soon became apparent that he neither wrote nor painted nor in any way spun. He was very charming, though, and was great fun to be with, as Ivy, who met him casually at a sidewalk cafe, was soon ready to admit, even though being with him usually entailed paying his expenses as well as her own.

It was in London that he asked her to marry him. This may have seemed rather ludicrous on the face of it, also presumptuous, but Ivy discovered to her delight that it was to her neither the one nor the other. She had already thought what a shame it was that she couldn't keep him, he was so charming and such fun, and then, looking at it that way, she began immediately to see no good reason why she shouldn't.

"Darling," she said, "you have no money."

"Unfortunately, that's true."

"You don't even have a job."

"Thank God."

"Well, how do you expect to marry me when you have no money and no job and no prospect for getting either?"

"I thought you might be willing to support me. I'm not very expensive."

That did it. He was so candid and appealing that she simply couldn't resist. After all, she thought, she had plenty for both of them, and it had all come to her so easily in the end.

It had been, really, a simple matter of hiding some ridiculous pills and then pretending, when Lewis needed them in the night, that they were lost and couldn't be found. It wasn't really like killing someone at all. It was merely like letting him die.

Anyhow, it seemed only fair to be generous with Lewis's money, now that she had it, and she couldn't think of anyone she would rather be generous with than Booth.

And so they were married in London.

Afterward, they went on and had fun in Rome and all sorts of other places, and the vacation-honeymoon stretched out and out. But eventually, all good things coming to an end, they came home to the house on Windham Road. At that time, she still didn't realize that Booth was a murderer, although there was, immediately af-

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ter her return, an incident that seemed later like a warning.

The incident wasn't much. It was no more, actually, than an example of peculiar behavior on the part of Leo Little, who was inclined to be peculiar anyway.

The second evening they were home, Ivy had Jill and Leo over to meet Booth, and pretty soon it was evident that Leo was staring at Booth in the oddest and most intent manner. Later in the evening, Booth had to leave the room, and Ivy took advantage of his absence to ask Jill directly if she didn't think he was absolutely marvelous.

"Yes, I do," Jill said. "I don't blame you at all for bringing him home. I would like to take him home myself."

This would clearly have been an infringment of Leo's rights as a husband, but he didn't seem to object.

As a matter of fact, he was still thinking intently and didn't even hear.

"You know," he said, "I have a very strong feeling."

"That's interesting and unusual," Jill said. "What sort of feeling?"

"I have a strong feeling that I've seen Booth somewhere before."

"Well, if you had ever seen him, I should think you'd remember it. He isn't exactly a garden variety type."

"I don't mean that I've seen him in person. It may just have been a picture."

"That probably explains it," Jill said. "He probably reminds you of someone you've seen in the movies. Now that I think of it, he looks very much like that actor we saw recently."

"What actor?"

"That actor we saw in the picture at the Paramount."

"What picture?"

"Oh, I don't know, Leo. Please don't be so aggressive about everything."

At that instant, Booth came back, bringing some drinks with him, and nothing more was said. Jill's theory about the actor was so reasonable, moreover, that Ivy hardly thought about it for a long time afterward. Booth was so handsome that people just naturally thought of movie actors when they saw him.

She certainly didn't think about it in relation to the attacks of nausea she began to have periodically, for there was nothing in what Leo had said to make her associate the two. She had the first attack just before going to bed. She was taking off her dress in the bedroom while Booth, on the edge of the bed, was taking off his shoes.

Suddenly, just then, she had this pain in her stomach and was instantly so sick that she barely had time to reach the bathroom. Booth was a perfect angel about it, and came in to hold her head.

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"Darling," he said, when she was able to answer, "whatever is wrong?"

"I don't know," she said. "I suddenly had this awful pain and nausea."

"How do you feel now? Better?"

"A little, I guess. Not very certain, though. I think I'd better lie down."

Booth led her back into the bedroom with an arm around her waist, and helped her to undress and to lie down on the bed. She had a notion that maybe she had been careless and gotten "caught", but she didn't really think so, and it was, besides, too early to be sick as a result, even if she had. She said as much to Booth, who had the same notion.

"Do you want me to call the doctor?" he said.

"No. That won't be necessary," she said.

"All right, my darling. Probably it was just something you ate or drank."

"Did I eat or drink anything that you didn't? I can't think of anything."

"Maybe you're more susceptible than I am."

This seemed plausible, different people having different reactions to different things, and the next morning she decided that she'd simply had indigestion or something like that. Nevertheless, just to be sure she wasn't caught, she went to her doctor, who told her that it was all in her mind and not to worry about it. She said she wouldn't, and she didn't. Not, that is, until she had another attack a week or so later.

It happened in the afternoon, about an hour after lunch, and Booth was out somewhere at the time. She was sick all alone, without anyone to hold her head or help her into bed. When Booth got home later, she pretended that she had only been taking a nap, because she was feeling better again and didn't want to bother him with it.

But what the doctor had told her about its being in her mind was true now, in a way that he hadn't intended. It *was* in her mind, and she couldn't get it out, and contrary to advice, she worried about it considerably. The

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way she looked at it, if she hadn't been "caught", as she now knew definitely that she hadn't, the attacks must have been caused by *something,* and what in the world could it be?

She was, in fact, so busy worrying about the last one that she neglected to worry sufficiently about the next one. And when she had it, after a lapse of another week, she thought that she was surely going to die.

As it happened, Jill was there at the time, although Booth was gone again, and so she had help and company, but she was afraid for a while that it wasn't going to be of any use in the end. She was abortively alarmed, however, so far as dying was concerned, and it became apparent after awhile that she was going to live.

Jill was almost as alarmed as Ivy, and she was altogether very considerate and helpful. She sat beside the bed and held Ivy's hand until Ivy had stopped being sick and was becoming reasonably comfortable again, although wan and weak.

"Darling," Jill said, "I don't want to be inquisitive, but have you ever had attacks like this before?"

"Twice," Ivy said.

"How odd! Recently?"

"Yes, within the past month."

"What is causing them? Do you know?"

"No, I don't. I only know what isn't, and what isn't is probably what you're thinking."

"Have you been to the doctor?" Jill asked.

"Yes, but he was no help. He said it was all in my mind."

"Doctors can be very obtuse sometimes. They fail to see what is directly in front of their noses."

"What do you mean?"

"Darling, there is something I've been wanting to tell you. I've been putting it off because I was afraid it would make you angry. Would it?"

"How can I know when I don't know what it is? Tell me, Jill."

Jill stood up and walked away a few steps, and returned, and stood looking down at Ivy on the bed.

"Do you remember that first night when Leo and I came over to meet Booth? How peculiar old Leo was about having seen Booth somewhere before? Well, he kept thinking about it and thinking about it. Just a few days ago he remembered where it was he had seen him, only it wasn't Booth. It was Bruce."

"Bruce? Who in the devil is Bruce?"

"Bruce is Booth's twin brother. Or was."

"Booth never told me he had a twin brother, or any brother at all, for that matter."

"Well, I don't suppose he's particularly proud of it."

"Jill, what are you trying to say? Tell me at once."

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"I'm trying to, darling. Where it was old Leo had seen Bruce was in a magazine. His picture, that is."

"What kind of magazine?"

"Oh, you know how Leo is. He has no taste whatever. He's always reading this sensational stuff like true crime stories. It was in that sort of magazine that he saw the picture. Of Bruce. Not Booth. That's what you must keep in mind. It seems that Bruce had three wives in a very short time, and all of them died quickly in strange ways. The authorities began to get suspicious, of course, especially after the third wife died. They arrested Bruce and had a preliminary hearing, something like that, but there wasn't enough evidence to bind him over for trial, and they had to let him go. He was very clever, if guilty.

"Anyhow, it was such a strange case, so mysterious and all, that some writer wrote it up for this magazine, and that's where Leo saw the picture of Bruce. It looked exactly like Booth, which explains why poor old Leo was so confused."

"I can assure you that Leo was not half so confused as I am at this moment," Ivy said. "I can hardly believe my ears. Whatever happened to Bruce?"

"Well, that just shows you how things work out. He died. Only a short while after the hearing, he came down with something serious, cancer or something, and he died. Booth was with him at the time, because after all they were twin brothers.

"Anyhow, Bruce was cremated, and his ashes were scattered, and Booth must have gone off to Paris, since that's where you met him. And that's that."

"Is it? I don't think so. Booth will have to answer for not telling me all this himself, if for nothing else. I wonder why I never read about this in the newspapers or anywhere?"

"It only came to a hearing, and didn't get much notice nationally. I never read about it, either. Anyway, it wasn't Booth who was involved. It was Bruce."

"Nevertheless, Booth has deceived me, to say the least, and will have to explain things. Besides, doesn't something like this sometimes run in families? It seems to me that the chances should be even better in the case of twins."

"Well," said Jill, "I hope not."

THAT EVENING, Ivy slipped over to Jill's house and looked at the magazine, just to satisfy herself, and there was the story, sure enough, just as Jill had said. The cover and the first pages of the magazine were gone, but the whole story was there, beginning about the middle, and the picture of Bruce looked enough like Booth to be the picture of his twin brother, which it was.

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She didn't read all of the story, she was so disturbed, but what she saw and read was more than enough, and she went back home at once with the determination to face Booth with it. She was no dunce, whatever else she was, and she realized perfectly well that her recent attacks could be the symptoms of slow poisoning with arsenic or something. It was better to satisfy herself on this matter sooner than later, she thought, and there wasn't any time sooner than right now.

Booth was in the television room, watching a variety show, and Ivy simply walked in without ceremony and turned the set off.

"Hey!" Booth said. "What's the idea?"

"I want to talk with you," Ivy said.

"Can't it wait a few minutes? There's a good dance number coming up."

"No, it can't wait a few minutes, or even a few seconds. It may interest you to know that I was sick again today, which makes the second time since the first time. Fortunately, Jill was here today to help me."

"Darling, why haven't you told me? We must see a doctor at once."

"I've already seen a doctor. Never mind that. What I want to know is why you never told me about your twin brother Bruce."

Booth leaned back and closed his eyes and was quiet for quite a long time.

"So you've learned about Bruce. I had hoped you never would. I'm sorry, Ivy. I can see now that I should have told you myself."

"Tell me now. I warn you that I know the truth, so you needn't try to deceive me any longer."

"There's very little to tell, when you come to it. Bruce was married three times. All his wives had fat insurance policies, and they all died suddenly. Nothing could be proved against him, however. He was never convicted."

"You think he was innocent?"

"Lord, no!" Booth had been leaning back all this time with his eyes closed. Now he sat suddenly erect and looked directly at Ivy. "He was guilty as sin!" Then his eyes narrowed. "Why did you ask about Bruce right after telling me about being sick? Do you think I'm a murderer too? Do you think I'm trying to poison you or something? That's it, isn't it?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to say it. The implication is clear enough."

She had begun the conversation as the injured party with a just grievance, but now, incredible as it was, she was on the defensive. Like it or not, she found herself trying to justify her position, and at the same time she admitted to herself that the last thing she really wanted was an open break with

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Booth if it could possibly be avoided. Marriage with him had been exciting and satisfying, and she was not ready to give him up. Not yet, anyhow.

"Well, if this isn't the limit!" she said. "I merely ask for an explanation, to which I am certainly entitled, and you instantly begin making false accusations."

"Were you asking for an explanation? It sounded very much to me as if I were being charged with guilt by association. If so, I'd better leave for good and all."

"I'm not asking you to leave. I admit that I would be sorry if you did. All I really want, if you must know, is to be reassured."

"Darling, come here." He laughed and opened his arms, into which she went with only the slightest and briefest feeling of entering a web. "I'm sorry about this. Really I am. Sit here on my lap and I'll tell you everything you want to know."

She sat on his lap while he told her, and everything he said agreed substantially with what she had heard from Jill and read in the magazine. He was altogether so contrite and candid that her suspicions were allayed and everything looked like being all right again.

No more was said afterward about Bruce, not for quite a long time, and to make things even brighter, she quit having the strange attacks. She began to wonder if she had really had had them at all, if they had not been in her mind only, as the doctor had said.

If she felt any suspicion because the attacks ceased so abruptly after her session with Booth, she refused to tolerate it for a minute. She told Jill that everything had been settled satisfactorily, and that ended it.

Until, that is, the incident of the brakes on the Stingray. And, after that, the incident of the strange investigator. These two, the incidents of the Stingray and the investigator, occurred on successive days, almost as if they had been arranged by fate, and they made delusion absolutely impossible any longer.

Ivy had bought this Stingray for Booth. He was like such a child about it that it was a delight to watch him. When he wasn't driving it, he was forever washing it and polishing it and things like that, and that's what he was doing, rubbing it down with a chamois, the afternoon that Ivy started to town. Her own car was parked in the drive beside his, and she got in it to leave, after kissing him goodby, but it wouldn't start.

"What's the matter?" he said, frowning.

"I don't know. It just won't start."

"Do you have gas?"

"Yes. The tank's almost full."

"I'm sorry, darling. My mechanical knowledge is exhausted. If it

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has gas, I have no idea what could be wrong."

"What a bother! Booth, what shall I do?"

"Why don't you take my Stingray?"

"Do you mind? I won't be gone long."

"Help yourself, Ivy. I was just about to go inside and clean up a bit, anyhow."

She moved over into the Stingray, drove slowly down the drive and turned left on Windham Road. On the road, she picked up speed and drove about half a mile to her first turn. Approaching the turn, she applied the breaks, or tried to, but to her alarm there weren't any. Inasmuch as the road was dead-end ahead, she was forced to make the turn, speed or not, and it was the sheerest good luck that no car was coming from the opposite direction, for she skidded wide, into the other traffic lane, and would have crashed head-on with anyone who was.

At once terrified and relieved, her hands stiffly clutching the steering wheel, she let the Stingray coast until it came to a stop beside the road. Then she began to tremble, and finally began to think.

Coincidence? Was it at all likely that the engine of her car would have refused to start at exactly the time that the brakes on Booth's went bad? Or had Booth, frightened off poison, taken to accidents? Perhaps his knowledge of mechanics, however meager, at least extended to the disconnection of essential wires, which had certainly been connected again by this time, and to the arranging of a leak of hydraulic brake fluid.

However, hard as it was to swallow the coincidence, there was still a margin of doubt in Booth's favor. The margin of doubt, in Ivy's judgment, was the obvious uncertainty of a fatal accident. If this were an area of steep hills and dangerous curves, it would be different. But it wasn't. It was level country with intersections that no driver who was not drunk or crazy would approach at excessive speed.

Barring the remote possibility of a head-on collision, the odds were greatly against her being killed, or even critically injured. Would a calculating murderer risk exposure against such odds? When you looked at it that way, it was even harder to swallow than the coincidence. However much of an ineffectual bum he was, Booth was no idiot.

Well, there was no need to decide anything immediately, and in the meanwhile it was clearly necessary to walk home. This turned out to be difficult and rather painful in her high-heeled sandals. She resolved, on the way, that she would try to surprise Booth when she got there, which would give her an opportunity to gauge his reaction in its first unguarded instant.

The resolution worked out very

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easily, luckily, for Booth was taking a shower, and all she had to do was walk into their bedroom and sit down facing the bathroom door. She was sitting there waiting when Booth came out with a towel wrapped around his middle.

A man surprised nearly naked, even by his wife, is certainly about as unguarded as he can get, and if Booth's expression betrayed the least bit of guilt, it was beyond Ivy to detect it. As a matter of fact, it was rather comically confused. It made Ivy want to laugh in spite of herself.

"Are you back so soon?" he said.

"I must be," she said, "since I am here."

"Did you change your mind about going to town?"

"As it happened, I had to. The brakes on the Stingray went bad. They don't work."

"My God, darling! You might have been killed!"

She was watching him intently. He was either properly shocked or a monster of deception, one or the other. It was really rather annoying. It made things so difficult for her. Was he the victim of a series of incredible incidents, or was he a household menace? One thing, at least, was apparent. She simply couldn't go on living indefinitely in the uncertainty of not knowing what might happen to her next.

"Fortunately, I wasn't," she said.

"Are you hurt at all?"

"Just my feet. Other than my nerves, that is. I had to walk home. The car's parked beside Windham Road."

"How far away?"

"Maybe a mile. A little less."

"I'd better go get it and drive it on to a garage."

"You'd be wiser to have it towed in. It has absolutely no brakes."

"That's all right, now that I know. I'll just creep along."

On his way out of the room, he hesitated at the door and looked back over his shoulder. "By the way," he said, "there's a funny thing. You had no sooner left in the Stingray than I decided to try your car again, just for luck, and it started right off. It must have gotten flooded or something. Isn't that odd?"

YES, IT WAS. It was damned odd, to say the least. It was almost as odd as being visited by the strange investigator the very next morning. It was about ten o'clock when the man came, and Ivy, who had wakened to find Booth up and gone ahead of her, was on the way downstairs to see what Mrs. Matson had for breakfast when she met Mrs. Matson coming up.

"There's a man to see you," Mrs. Matson said.

"A man? Who is he?"

"He wouldn't say. All he'd say was that it'd be to your advantage to see him."

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"Well, he's probably selling something. You should have sent him away."

"It's not too late, if you say so."

"No. I'll do it myself. You see about breakfast, please."

She went the rest of the way downstairs and into the room where the man was waiting. He was a middle-aged man with thin gray hair and an expanding belly. Rising as Ivy entered, he remained standing in the apparent hope that she would sit down and invite him to resume his chair, but Ivy wasn't extending any invitations to linger.

"Mrs. Andrews?" he said.

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"It's not so much what you can do for me, Mrs. Andrews, as what I can do for you. My name is Jackson Rush. Perhaps you'd better sit down."

This sounded to Ivy like the beginning of a clever sales pitch, and she didn't want any. What she wanted, as quickly as possible, was her breakfast.

"No," she said. "I don't care to. Please tell me what it is you want."

"As you wish. You are married, I believe, to a man named Booth Andrews?"

It was precisely then, at the sound of Booth's name from the mouth of this strange man, that she began to anticipate the most dreadful revelations. She was suddenly dizzy, swaying a little, and sat down after all.

"I am, yes. Why do you ask?"

"Mrs. Andrews, I have come a long way at my own expense to see you. I was compelled to come by a strong sense of obligation."

"Then you had better say what you came to say."

"I warn you that you won't like it. I am prepared to be ordered out of your house."

"Say it, whatever it is, and we will see."

"Fair enough. Are you aware that your husband had a twin brother named Bruce?"

"I am," Ivy said.

"Oh? Did you know it when you were married?"

"I didn't know it then. I know it now."

"Did you also know that he murdered three wives?"

"Did he? I understood it quite differently. He was accused of murdering only one, and he was never tried for that. There was insufficient evidence."

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"True. I am an insurance investigator, Mrs. Andrews, and I was assigned to the third case. I'm sorry to say that I flubbed it badly."

"If you are asking for my sympathy, you are wasting your time."

"I'm not asking for your sympathy. I'm asking for your confidence. Bruce Andrews was guilty of murder. He was three times guilty."

"That's your opinion. Anyhow, it's an academic point at best. Booth is not Bruce."

"Isn't he?"

This was said so quietly, although with deadly emphasis, that Ivy for a moment missed its significance. Then, when she got it, she did not dare to move for fear of falling out of her chair, or to speak for fear of screaming. After a long and terrible silence, she managed with a great effort to answer calmly.

"Of course he isn't. Booth is Booth."

"Are you so sure? I'm not. Bruce Andrews, at the time of his presumed death, was living in an isolated cottage on the west coast. The only person with him was his twin brother Booth. The death was sudden, the cremation almost immediate. Oh, it was handled very cleverly, and it was over before most folk were aware of it. Mrs. Andrews, think a moment! Whether the death was natural or contrived, it offered a beautiful chance for a three-time murderer to assume a clean identity."

The man who called himself Jackson Rush paused, creating a hiatus of silence that threatened to explode soundlessly in the room. "Which twin died, Mrs. Andrews? Which twin are you married to?"

And still, miraculously she was capable of answering calmly.

"I'm married to Booth."

"I think not," he said, watching her. "I have excellent reason to believe that Booth Andrews is dead. Mrs. Andrews, you are married to a wife-killer. That's what I came all this distance to tell you."

She stood up very carefully, bracing herself against the edge of her chair.

"Now you have told me. You came, you said, prepared to be ordered to leave. Please do so at once."

"Yes. Of course. I'll show myself out."

He did, hat in hand, silently. Ivy, alone, sat down again stiffly, hands seeking and finding each other in her lap. She was still sitting there, not having moved an inch, when Booth came into the room ten minutes later.

"Mrs. Matson says you had a caller," he said. "Was it anyone I know?"

"I believe it was, Bruce. His name was Rush."

He came across the room and sat down facing her. "You called me Bruce. Why?"

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"Because that's your name. Isn't it?"

"Did Rush say so?"

"Yes."

They were both silent for a while, staring at each other.

It was remarkable that she was not so distressed by the knowledge that he was a wife-killer, which she now believed, as she was by the suspicion, wildly irrational, that he had killed the man who somehow seemed to have been her rightful second husband. This feeling, ironically, was not compromised by the fact that she herself had had at least something to do with the death of the first husband."

"Well," he said, "I don't suppose there is any use in denying it."

"None whatever."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"I expect you to leave my house. I can hardly go on living with a man who may kill me any day."

"Why not? Your risk is no greater than mine."

"What? What did you say?"

"Oh, come, darling. I'm not completely witless. And I haven't been completely idle. I know how your first husband died, and it naturally occurred to me, being what I am, that you may have nudged him a bit. Not much, I admit. All you did, I've deduced, was hide his medicine so that he couldn't find it in the night when he needed it. Quite clever and relatively safe. The only mistake you made, darling, was in not putting the medicine back where you took it from. That would have been his bedside table, within easy reach, I should imagine. Certainly not on the top shelf of the linen closet, where I found it."

"You're insane. You don't know what you're saying."

"Perhaps. Nevertheless, I predict that you won't throw me out." He smiled his charming small-boy smile and, leaning far forward from his chair, patted her on one knee. "You see, darling, you deserve me. We suit each other exactly."

She had for a moment a naked feeling of *conviction* that she was hopelessly trapped. She didn't doubt that he had found the medicine, for he had named the exact place where she had hidden it after removing it from the drawer of Lewis's bedside table. She had simply forgotten it, and she had not even thought about it for months.

"Who would have dreamed that you could be such a sneak?" she said.

"I have practically no ethical standards. I told you so in the beginning."

"If you accuse me of hiding the medicine, I'll simply deny it."

"Of course you will. But who knows what would develop from the stink I'll raise? It would be interesting to see, wouldn't it?"

She didn't think so. She thought,

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on the contrary, that it would be altogether too dangerous. There was really nothing for her to do but accept a kind of precarious status quo, that was clear. In the meanwhile she would have a little time to devise some kind of plan for ridding herself of him for good and all.

In this respect, if she was not mistaken, she had an advantage that could easily be exploited. Her advantage, as she saw it, lay in the fact that he, with all his experience in eliminating wives, was inclined to minimize the knowledge that she was not completely without experience, however limited, in eliminating husbands. He was, in short, vain. And vanity is vulnerable. She would simply have to kill him, one way or another, before he killed her.

It turned out, by a remarkable incident of poetic justice, to be no one but Jill who eventually suggested the method and the place and even, roughly, the time. It had been Jill who was responsible for her meeting Booth in the first place, and it was only fair that Jill should now be responsible, however innocently, for her getting rid of him. The suggestion was made no later than the Thursday evening following the visit of Jackson Rush.

Ivy and Booth, superficially amicable, had been invited by Jill and Leo to drop over for a drink. It was then, after a couple of martinis, that the suggestion was made.

"Leo and I are going out to Lake Pawnee for the weekend," Jill said to Ivy. "Why don't you and Booth come along?"

"Sure," Leo said. "Why don't you?"

"That might be fun," Ivy said. "Would you like to go, Booth?"

"It's all right with me," Booth said.

"It's all arranged, then," Jill said. "We'll leave tomorrow evening."

And so, so quickly and easily, the place was established, thanks to Jill.

IT WAS LATER, the next evening when they were driving out to Lake Pawnee in the Littles' station wagon, that the method was suggested, and again it was thanks to Jill.

"Do you like to canoe?" Jill said, turned sidewise in the front seat and talking to Ivy and Booth in the rear.

"I don't know," Ivy said. "I've never tried."

"It's not difficult, and it's lots of fun," Jill said. "Lake Pawnee is just a small lake, mainly for fishing, and motors aren't allowed on it. The swimming is no good, so, if you don't sail or canoe or something like that, there's nothing much to do but fish."

"I guess I'll have to sail or canoe," Booth said. "I hate fishing, and I can't swim a stroke."

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It was all so casual and sudden that Ivy almost missed her cue. What had Booth said? *I can't swim a stroke*, he'd said. It was odd that Ivy had never learned this, or even suspected it. Booth was good at tennis and golf and all kinds of games that it was only natural to assume that he would be good at swimming, too.

"Darling," she said, "I didn't dream that you couldn't swim."

"I can't. Not a stroke."

"Are you afraid of the water or something?"

"Not as long as I'm above it. Actually, I like it best in my whiskey."

Everyone laughed, and nothing more was said, but Ivy kept on thinking just the same. Her optimism, which made her feel quite gay and hopeful, was based on the fact that she herself was an expert and durable swimmer. Everything, of course, depended on that.

The next morning, after a night spent comfortably in Leo and Jill's lodge, Leo went off fishing in a rowboat, and Jill got out a long canoe and began to show Ivy and Booth how to paddle it. It was really more difficult than it appeared, keeping it in balance and guided straight by using the paddle properly on alternate sides. But Booth picked up the technique quickly, having a kind of feel for it, and pretty soon he was paddling around like a veteran.

"I believe I'll paddle across the lake and back," he said. "It isn't very far, is it?"

"It's farther than it looks," Jill said. "Distance is deceptive on the water."

"How far?"

"Oh, a little less than a mile, I should think."

"Well, that's not very far. I'll come right back. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. Be careful not to tip over, though. The old stream channel is out there in the middle, and the water's deep. Sixty feet at least."

"Don't worry," Booth said. "As you see, I've become an expert with this thing."

Ivy and Jill waited for him on the dock while he went and returned; then they all went up to the lodge and had a couple of drinks and some sandwiches for lunch. Quite a while afterward Leo came back from fishing with a string of black bass, which he cleaned for dinner. Jill fried them, and they ate early, and then, about seven o'clock, Jill began to wonder what they could do with the evening.

"I'd rather not do anything," Leo said. "My hand hurts."

"What's the matter with your hand?" Jill said.

"I stuck a fish hook in it. I guess it's become infected a little."

"Leo, you're a perfect idiot about such things. Didn't you put anything on it?"

"I looked for the iodine, but

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there isn't any. The bottle's in the medicine cabinet, but it's empty."

Jill took his hand and looked at it. She shook her head. "Leo, you're the absolute limit. The hand is clearly infected, and we must put something on it at once. There's a little shop on the other side of the lake where iodine can be bought. It's directly across."

"I'll go get some," Booth said.

"Oh, don't bother," Leo said. "Jill's always making too much of something."

"No matter what you say," Jill said, "we must have some iodine. Would you go, Booth? I'd appreciate it."

"Sure. I'll paddle over in the canoe."

And there it was, the last of the three elements. The method was drowning. The place was the lake. And the time was now.

"I believe I'll go with you," Ivy said.

She expected Booth to protest, but he didn't, not in the least, and this was the most incredible piece of good luck of all. It could hardly be that he felt no suspicion, for he was as wary of her as she was of him.

Possibly he didn't want to risk exposing anything to the Littles, but it was more likely, she thought, his perfectly ridiculous vanity. It kept him from giving her proper credit as a menace, and he was, besides, positively cocky about his ability to handle himself and the canoe in any emergency that might arise.

"All right," Booth said. "Let's go."

Dusk had come on. They could see the cluster of lights across the dark water on the other side of the lake. Booth sat in the end of the canoe in the paddling position, and Ivy sat facing him in the center. Handling the paddle with his newly developed skill, Booth paddled directly toward the lights and they were soon at the shore below them. Ivy waited beside the canoe while Booth went for the iodine, and he was back with it quickly.

"Well, here I am," he said, "my errand of mercy half done. I feel like a missionary or something. Shall we start back?"

He was standing beside her, and all at once he slipped an arm around her waist and tipped her face up and around so that he could look down into it.

"I realize that I've been on bread and water lately in the matter of affection, and there's no moon up yet to corrupt you, but I wonder if you could spare me a kiss?"

"I might even enjoy it," she said.

Which, in fact, she did. It set astir within her such aberrant and disturbing emotions that she regretted, briefly, that it would be the last kiss they would ever share. The regret still lingered when they reached, returning, the place in the lake where the old stream channel

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was, but she didn't, of course, permit it to deter her a second longer in doing what must most definitely be done.

Now! she thought, *Now!*

Simultaneously, she kicked off her flats and threw herself sidewise, capsizing the canoe. As she went over the side into the water, she retained her hold on the light craft, pulling it down and toward her with all her strength, which was considerable, to insure that it would fill and sink and afford no unfortunate means of escape. She had accomplished this and was about to strike out for shore when she felt Booth's hands all at once at her throat.

Ivy twisted and reached instinctively for his, clinging desperately with all her deceptive strength, while the wonder grew and grew within her that someone who couldn't swim a stroke had nevertheless managed to reach her so quickly, through such a distance of dark water.

HOME FROM the funeral, Leo pulled off his shoes and wiggled his toes. His feet hurt, and he needed a drink. Anticipating his need, Jill brought him a strong one.

"Well, it's all over," he said. "I hope you're satisfied."

Jill said, "It went about as I expected, although it went a little wrong in the end."

"I must admit that you're a good organizer. However, in all fairness,

you will have to give a certain amount of credit to your staff."

"Gladly." She raised her glass in the gesture of a toast. "Here's to Uncle Jackson, the best bit player who never went on the stage."

"While you're handing out kudos, don't forget old Leo. It was a lot of trouble getting that phony story printed and inserted in that old magazine, to say nothing of writing it in the first place."

"Darling, it was quite impressive for a first effort. You seem to have a kind of talent for it. Maybe you could write professionally if you would only try."

"Not I. One published story is enough, even if I did have to publish it myself. I'd like to remind you, though, that I really stabbed myself with that damn fish hook. Stark realism, no less."

"I know you did, and I appreci-

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ate it. How is your hand now? Does it still hurt?"

"No. Only my feet. What I would like to know is why you were so sure that Ivy would sink the canoe and leave old Booth to drown."

"Oh, there is no mystery to that," Jill said. "It simply fitted a kind of pattern. It was just what Ivy would do, I mean. It was essentially the same sort of thing she did when she hid poor old Lewis's medicine. She didn't kill him. It was far too risky. She just let him die."

"You were certain of what she'd done to Lewis from the beginning. I concede that you were right, but I could never understand what made you so sure."

"Surely you can by this time. I've told you and told you. I was over there the morning after Lewis died, even before the doctor arrived, and his medicine was nowhere to be seen. I know that he habitually put it in the drawer of his bedside table, but it wasn't there. It wasn't anywhere close, because I looked carefully, and it just wasn't. Lewis would never have gone to bed without having it at hand, as you know very well. It meant that Ivy had deliberately taken it away; that's all."

"It was quite an assumption, but as I said, it turned out to be justified. It was a dirty trick to play on old Lewis."

"Yes, it was," Jill said. "And I was determined not to let her get away with it. Lewis was a dear, the best friend we ever had, and it wasn't right for her to treat him that way."

"Well, she didn't get away with it, after all, but I can't help feeling that it turned out pretty rough on old Cousin Booth," Leo said, stirring his drink.

"That may be so, but I refuse to worry about it. Booth never had much character, if you ask me, and very little imagination. I had to guide him practically every step of the way. The only reason he was able to fool Ivy for a minute was because his part fitted him perfectly. He didn't even have to act to any extent. However, he was the only one I could rely on. I was positive that Ivy would fall for him end over elbows, as she did, and once I had him next door, I could see to it that he did things properly. I practically had to measure out the arsenic that he gave her to make her sick, for I was afraid he'd give her too much and kill her in a way that would be detected and get him into trouble.

"I also had to tell him exactly what to do about the brakes on the Stingray. It was, of course, absolutely essential to frighten Ivy into trying to kill Booth. That would make his killing her a kind of self-defense, and was the most my conscience would permit. Moreover, I had to verify my belief that she was capable of murder. I was constantly on pins and needles for fear he'd

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blow things. Cousin Booth, to be honest, was hardly competent."

"Oh, I don't know about that. He did his job, anyhow."

"That's true, but you may be unhappy when you find out how much he cost us," Jill said. "Paying his expenses to Europe and all that, besides a small fortune just to get him to cooperate."

"Don't overlook Lewis's money. He would have had at least half of that. What a pity that he missed out."

"Yes. However, I had to think of everything all along, and I can hardly be blamed for one small mistake. Who would have dreamed that Ivy was so strong? Booth was a wonderful swimmer. You would certainly think that he could have drowned a small woman without permitting her to drown him in the process. It's just another example of his incompetence."

"That Ivy was quite a girl, when you come right down to it," Leo said.

"Yes." Jill kicked off her own shoes and tucked up her feet. "Booth's life may have been short, unfortunately. But I'm sure it had its share of its compensation in the last year."

Coming Soon:

CRAZY QUILT

A New LIEUTENANT JOSEPH MARCUS Novelet

by FLETCHER FLORA

She was young, beautiful—and very dead, by her own hands. And one who had loved her waited in the dark, waited to take his reckoning on the man who had driven her to die.

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Many deadly weapons they had chosen to destroy him. Until the last, most terrible of all—the sound of a baby's crying.

THE SEA TOWER

by THEODORE MATHIESON

TO ARTHUR GILLAND, in custody between two guards of the State security police as their car bumped across a stretch of gorse-dotted headland, the sight of the lighthouse came as a surprise.

"Is that where you're taking me?" he asked the guard on his right, but got no answer.

To Gilland the tower looked like a finger raised in futile warning after a deed is done. Its walls, once painted a proud white, were mottled, revealing patches of red sandstone, and the girdle of windows which formerly permitted the passage of a friendly light, had been solidly bricked in.

It's not a lighthouse any more, Gilland thought. Just a useless sea tower. A relic, as they think I am.

The car drew up behind a small green coupe which was parked near the base of the building, but Gilland had no time to note if it were occupied. His guards hustled him into the tower, up a spiraling flight of metal stairs, to a room just below the topmost chamber.

As the door clicked shut behind him, Gilland stood quite still, and listened to the descending footsteps of the guards.

He saw at once his prison was neat and freshly painted, and contained all the practical adjuncts of comfortable living. But it took him several seconds to realize—since they were out of context—that many of the furnishings and all of the books, as well as the typewriter, were his own, taken from his San Francisco apartment!

At the sound of cars starting up, Gilland leaned across a deep but narrow window, which stood open, and peered down. The two automobiles, looking tiny as insects, were moving inland, and disappeared shortly amid the gorse. As

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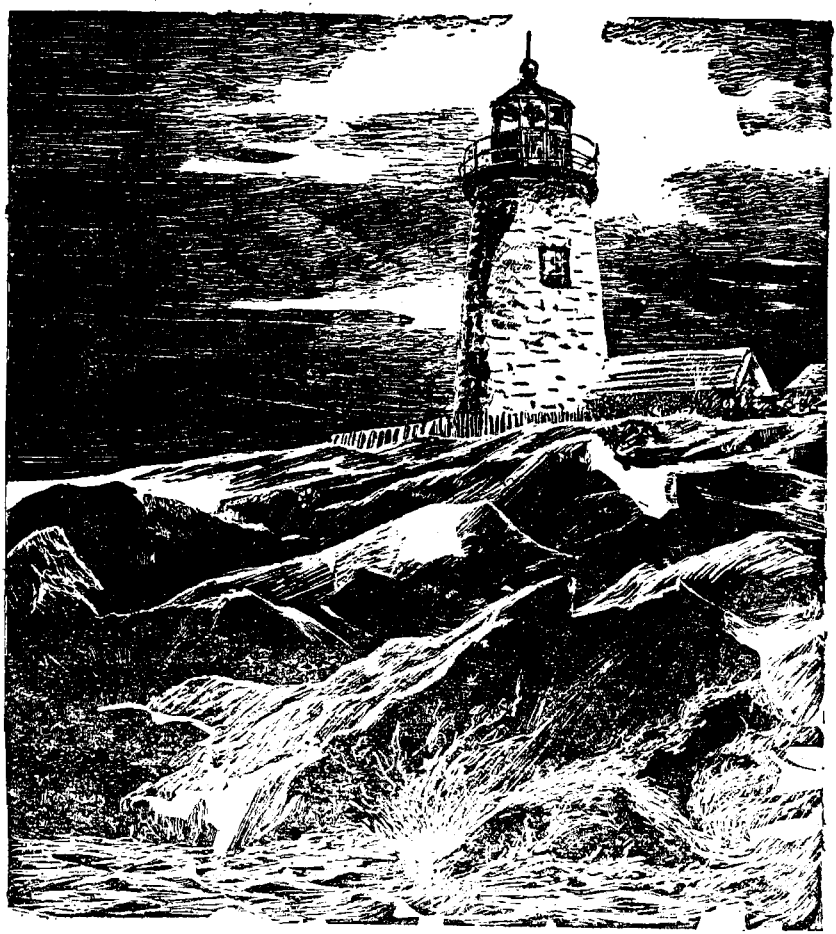

far as Gilland could see, there was only rock and ocean, and empty horizon.

He began moving about, examining the room. The door through which he'd recently entered was locked, of course. Rapping upon it, he discovered it was metal beneath the prettily painted exterior.

He climbed the curved stair which led to what was once the light chamber, but found the upper floor blocked off by stout, wooden planks. He lit a cigarette and paced, stopping finally to browse at the bookshelves, from

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which presently he took out a copy of *Walden*.

Thoreau, he mused, had enumerated the four necessities of life as food, shelter, warmth, and clothing.

Well, Colonel Sperling, Director of Psychological Security, had provided him with clothing, shelter and warmth, at least. But how about food? He hastened to the broad cupboard in the kitchen unit, threw open the doors. At the sight of a profusion of canned goods, he heaved a sigh. He had everything he needed to live well for a long time.

Then what was the catch?

Certainly Sperling did not expect him, a long-time professor of English and American literature at the University at Berkeley to be idle when he had typewriter, paper, and books at hand! The director would know, too, that one with his, Gilland's, proclivities towards seclusion, could exist quite happily without human companionship.

Where, then, was the threat?

As if in answer to his question, he heard a low moaning, like a senile complaint, which seemed to come from above. Slowly he reclimbed the stairs that led to the upper chamber, and sitting down on the steps just beneath the plank barrier, waited for the sound to be repeated . . .

"Frankly, we intend to get at you, Professor Gilland," Colonel Sperling had said that morning at Old Quentin. "Unless you cooperate. Why not avoid unpleasantness? We already have the testimony of those university students of yours who secretly attended meetings in your home. We know all about your indoctrination of the —er—so-called 'Thoreau ethic'."

Gilland had smiled wryly and said: "The idealizing of the individual is a concept highly thought of, even in our own time, Colonel."

"Blindly, cherished, yes. But since the change-over, you know in what esteem it is held. If your subversive activities were confined to the campus, we might merely have had you dismissed from the faculty. But we are now convinced that this movement is far more widespread than we at first imagined. We are also sure that you, Professor Gilland, are one of the organizers of it, and that you know the names of cooperating members in other American universities! Once again, will you give us those names?"

"I tell you I do not know them."

Sperling tugged at his gray tunic and smiled frigidly.

Very well; you will start for the coast at once."

"And when we arrive, shall it be the rack?" Gilland asked ironically.

Sperling looked offended.

"In my department, professor, we do not use medieval methods!

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Our technique with you is based upon our knowledge of your socio-psychic pattern; a method which, I assure you, shall be no less effective—or painful, I fear—in the long run!"

"The Achilles heel, or room one hundred and one technique? Are you sure you know me well enough?"

Still smiling his icy smile, Sperling had snapped open a Manila folder and referred briefly to a typewritten page.

"First, you are forty-four years old—a touchy, vulnerable time for a man as well as a woman. Second, you were rather over-fond of your mother—perhaps because your father was too stern and practical and disapproved of your escapist tendencies. Third, you were an only child, over-protected, and your nature is essentially an impractical one.

"And fourth, as a boy you had poliomyelitis; although it did not cripple you physically, it left you extremely sensitive to sounds, especially those of high frequency. Fifth, you have had two marriages which ended in divorce after only two or three years, and you are noticeably touchy on the subject . . . Take your pick, professor; there are at least a half dozen more points of attack."

"I congratulate you on your thoroughness," Gilland said.

Sperling said earnestly: "You represent a problem to which I have given much time and care. I shall visit you personally within the week. I sincerely hope, for all our sakes, professor, that you are then in a proper frame of mind to answer my questions!"

GILLAND, sitting upon the tower stairs, felt a great sense of relief when he discovered the moaning was nothing more than the wind, which had somehow found entrance to the upper chamber, and was voicing a cry that was uncannily human.

But his respite was brief. As he started to light a cigarette, he heard another sound—this time inside his own chamber—an animal sound, high and penetrating, like the mewing of a kitten.

He scanned the scene below him, searching for the source. When the cry came again, now accompanied by a rustling, like the scamper of mice, he decided it issued from behind a tall, winged screen that stood between the kitchen and bathroom units.

In three seconds he had reached the screen, where he hesitated, his hand upon the frame. For as long as there was silence he stood, paralyzed like one in a dream; but when the mewing came again, this time louder and more demanding, he pushed the screen roughly aside.

Upon a low table sat a little wicker basket, *and inside the basket lay an infant child.*

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Tingling from the shock of his discovery, Gilland thought fleetingly of something Samuel Johnson had once said to Boswell: "If an intelligent and sensitive man were locked up in a room with an infant, and left to tend it alone, he would surely be driven out of his mind!"

The infant in the crib was pink-faced and tiny, and looked like every other young human Gilland had ever seen. The child was also wet; so Gilland tried changing it first, using one of the eight diapers which he found in a drawer of the table. His diapering was amateurish, of course, and probably uncomfortable, but Gilland had hoped to be rewarded by silence. The child continued to cry.

"Hungry, boy, hungry?" Gilland asked in a voice so strained he hardly recognized it. "I'll see what they got for you!"

With an ache of helplessness he fumbled among the cans in the cupboard, knocking some of them to the floor. How old was the child? Weeks old? Months? He'd heard about "solid feeding" but didn't know if the child were ready for it. Milk would be safer for now.

Meanwhile the piercing cry was unnerving him, as high pitched sounds always did, so that he failed to notice the small glass jars which contained pureed fruit and vegetables.

"Milk—milk!" he repeated desperately, and then realized that the shiny tin can which he held was what he was looking for. That the label had been removed did not seem significant then. He punctured the can with an opener, and poured some milk into one of the baby bottles which stood upon a shelf. He capped it with a nipple which he took from a box beside the bottles.

On his way to the crib, he stopped. He should have warmed the milk; also, diluted it. Strange how the cry made logical thinking so difficult. He added water to the milk, then poured the liquid into a saucepan on the stove, and lit the butane gas under it.

What seemed an aeon later, he carried the warmed milk to the crib.

Silence, and blessed relief.

Gilland sank weakly on a chair and stared at the child, paying no attention to the low sucking noises. What if the child started crying and he couldn't stop it? The thought terrified him. But there was no need for that, if he just followed his instructions faithfully. Surely there must be some instructions.

Gilland went back to the cupboard and examined the neat stack of condensed milk cans. Every label had been removed. He noted, too, that the small jars of pureed fruit and vegetables, which he now recognized as baby food, were likewise without labels!

He searched the room thoroughly, not forgetting to scan the books.

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At the end of ten minutes his rising suspicion was confirmed. There was not a line on baby care in the place!

You poor little bastard, Gilland thought. *They've deserted you to the tender care of a man who can't stand your crying. They don't care a hang about what happens to you, so long as they get to me. Unless—*

Once again he searched, but found no wires or hidden microphones. Then he sat down at his desk, and slipping a sheet of paper into the typewriter, began to write some invective against the State. Seconds later he cursed his forgetfulness. The clacking had awakened the child. It was mewing again . . .

By the evening of the first day, Gilland knew, by the child's almost constant crying, that he must be blundering plenty. Whenever the child napped, he would doggedly consider his probable errors, knowing that when the crying started again, he could not think connectedly. Perhaps he was not tucking the baby in tightly enough, and should use those big, four inch safety pins which had originally fastened the blanket to the mattress. For some obscure reason he had decided not to use them.

Or maybe he was not bathing the infant sufficiently, or he'd left a residue of soap on the child's body which irritated its skin. The baby seemed rashy in spots.

God knows he had kept it dry, at the cost of slavish preoccupation with washing the diapers and drying them near the stove, whose burners were lit almost constantly. The room was insufferably hot, both day and night.

He knew vaguely, too, about colic, and had carried the baby around for long periods, patting its back. He was rewarded then with quiet, but the child would always start crying when he laid it back in the crib.

The infant's increasing demands kept him sleepless the first night. Also the second, and the third.

On the morning of the fourth day he realized that now, each time the child cried, *his sense of desperation was growing.* The pitch of its voice seemed to attack a vulnerable spot inside him, weakening his self-control as it stirred up unbidden and hateful emotions.

That morning he handled the child resentfully while washing it, and when a protesting cry ensued, replaced it too roughly in the crib. He paced in anguish, stopping only to push pellets of soap deep into his ears in an attempt to seal off the hateful cry, but could not.

He leaned far out the window, almost to the point of jeopardy, but the cry still pursued him.

By noon he was forced to make an admission that he'd tried to avoid; he was coming to hate the child. Hate it because he felt in thrall to it. Doubtless a woman

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could love what he found an ignominious state of bondage, even if the child were not her own. Love made self sacrifice in such circumstances feasible, even desirable to a woman. But Gilland could feel no love, only a swelling hatred.

As he continued tending the child he started to think: *What if it were dropped? What if it were scalded? What if it were smothered in its crib?*

The child, unquestionably sensing his antipathy, started crying even when Gilland carried him around, so there was less quiet than ever.

At last, during mid-afternoon, there came a terrible instant when Gilland heard himself saying: "You need a little sun, youngster. Yes, maybe that's exactly what you need."

He carried baby in its crib to the window and set it on the broad embrasure in the sun. For a moment the crying stopped, then started again.

With a pounding heart, Gilland put his hand upon the basket as if to push it more into the sun. He felt the crib move an inch or two towards the edge, hesitated, then gave another push . . .

It could always be put down to an accident.

The basket was almost teetering on the outside edge of the embrasure now, so that even a gust of wind could upset the balance. Then the child stopped crying, and in that instant Gilland seized the crib and in a fit of trembling carried it back to the table . . .

How long would his self control last?

During the fourth night Gilland started doing impulsive and irrational things. As he tended the baby, he started singing at the top of his lungs, trying to concentrate on his own voice. Later he shook the baby's rattle in a frenzy in an attempt to distract the child as well as himself.

He climbed to the top of the stairs near the upper chamber, where once again he heard the moaning of the wind, and called out with idiot cheerfulness:

"Here I am again, old fellow. I've guessed who *you* are—the spirit of the tower's past. Just like Dickens! You're complaining they put you out of a job; then Sperling came and took your light and covered your eyes, and used for his own purpose. You think it would have been better if Sperling had razed you to the ground, rather than to rob you of the use for which you were built! I don't blame you, old fellow. I'd complain, too!"

Near dawn, during a silent period, Gilland lay tossing on the sofa, dreading a recurrence of the crying. He feared what he might do. He was at the end of his tether.

Beyond the window, a lopsided moon nearly touched the horizon, and the sea murmured faintly. He

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could hear the cricket chorus from amid the gorse.

Then, as he looked at his books, he remembered how he'd wanted to trace the full extent of Hazlitt's influence on Stevenson, by comparing the style and phraseology of two essays on walking tours. Why not do it now? If he could get deep enough into his research, perhaps the crying would cease to unnerve him.

Eagerly he sat down at his desk with the requisite books in front of him.

He started with Stevenson, and before he'd finished the first paragraph, Gilland felt steal over him the familiar fascination of Stevenson's lucid style; his heart lightened for the first time since his arrest a month ago.

So sharpened was his attention that he did not even hear the first stirrings from the crib. When the initial mewing began, only part of his mind became aware of it; he plunged deeper into the essayist's thought.

The child, accustomed by now to instant attention, raised the piercing decibels of its demand, terminating each breath-long cry with a gutteral note of infantile rage—

In dismay Gilland felt his concentration slipping, and tried desperately to hold on to it. One sentence he read five times before he could grasp the thought, and then suddenly the page became a meaningless blur; he sat trembling and appalled as, once again, he felt his rational powers deserting him. At last, with a despairing groan he threw the book aside.

His mouth was dry, his blood pounded in his ears. Stiffly he walked to the crib, picked up the large blanket pin from the table. Unfastening it, he pulled it open like a jack knife, so that it became a lethal weapon a good eight inches long.

He stared down at the creature, whose face was not recognizable as human—a mere mass of wrinkles with a pink-gummed orifice through which issued the soul-killing sound.

Gilland raised the weapon, staring at the heaving diaphragm. Then after a pause, during which he could hear his breath whistling through his clenched teeth, he plunged the weapon down . . .

Colonel Sperling stepped out of the Security car at the foot of the tower and glanced upwards at the window. There was no sign of Gilland. Well, it had been almost two weeks now. Unexpected business in New York had delayed Sperling, but he felt all the more eager to see the results of his experiment on Gilland.

There were several outcomes possible, he knew, but he'd analyzed closely, and was confident that any one of the results would contribute to the enrichment of the Security program.

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Ordering the two armed guards to remain below, the director ascended the stairs alone, inserted the key into the lock, and turned it. Then, taking his revolver from a shoulder holster, he pushed open the door.

The room was dead quiet, and at first Sperling did not see Gilland lying upon the sofa. When he did, he gave a start, because Gilland was holding a baby rattle, and looking at it as if hypnotized. A chill of foreboding seized the director as he hesitated upon the threshold.

"Come on in, Colonel," Gilland said quietly. "I saw you coming, but I didn't feel like waving. Speak softly so you don't wake the baby."

Cautiously Sperling entered the room. He sensed all was not as he expected after all. He kept his eyes on Gilland as he moved towards the window.

"By all means call up reinforcements, if you're afraid I'll force you into battle."

Sperling caught his breath. Gilland's voice sounded so steady and confident!

"You seem very sure of yourself," Sperling said finally.

"The last thing you wanted, eh, Sperling?" Gilland's voice was mocking. "Why don't you look at the baby? Go ahead!"

Tight lipped, the director moved to the crib, where he saw the child looking pink and clean, and sleeping peacefully.

"Please note the child is still breathing," Gilland said.

"What do you mean?"

"I almost fell into your trap. You wanted me to kill that baby, didn't you! No, no, spare me your lies. You knew my weak spot is my hypersensitivity to sound. You banked on my losing control. If I had killed that child, the guilt I would feel afterwards would have crushed me to a jelly, and you could have spread me so thin you could see right through me. Sorry, but it didn't work."

"So I see."

The baby started moving in the crib and emitted a wisp of a cry. Gilland promptly took out a cigarette and lighted it.

"You have a bandage on your arm," Sperling observed. He knew that somehow he'd failed with Gilland, and accepted his defeat with professional objectivity.

Gilland glanced down at the bandage.

"If it's any satisfaction to you, Sperling, you almost got your way.

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I stood over that crib and was going to stab the boy with the blanket pin you had left at hand for that very purpose. But as I brought the pin down, I must have blacked out for a second. At least my conscious mind did, and the next thing I knew my arm was hurting, and the pin was sticking right in the middle of it. I don't know how it happened; something inside took over, made me put my arm across the crib as I struck."

Gilland looked away. "Maybe the fact that I couldn't give my wives any children made it impossible for me to take the life of somebody else's child."

"How interesting," Sperling said sarcastically.

"It gets even more interesting." Gilland took a puff on his cigarette. "I felt the pain in my arm, and suddenly I didn't hear the crying any more. That was my way out, Sperling. One you hadn't counted on. Pain counteracted the sound, and I could think rationally."

Sperling hunched his shoulders as the baby began to cry in earnest, and as he watched uneasily, Gilland rolled up the sleeve of his unbandaged arm, revealing flesh that was stippled with round burns. Sperling watched fascinated as Gilland applied the glowing end of his cigarette to a clear place on his skin; held it there for a second or two before he withdrew it.

"A burn like that hurts for a long time," Gilland said as if lecturing a class. "It blots out sound, long enough for me to act coolly and take good care of the baby's needs."

"You're very clever, but we shall find another way of getting to you, professor."

Gilland rose casually and pressed out his cigarette in a tray. He picked up the rattle again and shook it.

"But you know, Sperling, pain has another side effect. After it abates, your mind works more clearly, more penetratingly, and decisions come more easily."

"Your days of making decisions are over," Sperling snapped.

Gilland nodded. "That's just what I've been thinking. You see, from now on you'll force me to do things your way. I don't underestimate your power to get at me sooner or later. And after you do, I won't be myself at all. I'll be like this old tower. Look what you've done to *it*.

"It wasn't built to provide you with a place in which to kill people's souls or bodies. It was built to *save* lives. I don't want to become like it. I'd rather die than live in a state so rotten, so perverted that it will sacrifice the life of a child just to—"

"That's enough!" Sperling shouted in anger.

"Not half enough." Gilland shook the rattle derisively. The director reached for his gun.

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"Go ahead," Gilland taunted. "The state would consider that equal odds—a gun against a baby rattle!"

With an oath, the director stepped to the window and gave a shout. As Gilland moved towards him, Sperling backed away from the window.

"Keep away from me," he ordered, but did not raise his gun.

"Afraid of a rattle, Colonel?"

"Get that damned thing—"

Gilland thrust the rattle forward, straight into the socket of Sperling's right eye. There came the sound of crumpling plastic, as the full four inches of the blanket pin, concealed within the rattle, shot forward into the director's brain. He opened his mouth to protest, but no sound issued as he toppled in a crumpled heap at Gilland's feet.

Then, as Gilland heard the ringing of the guards' boots upon the iron stair, he sat down confidently on the sofa.

He had won—over Sperling—even over old Sam Johnson, who'd said that a man locked up with an infant would lose his mind!

His mind was working as sharply as it ever had, so that he knew that when the guards came in and saw what he'd done, they might even thank him. He'd taken a yoke off their necks. Now they and everybody else could make their own decisions again!

Hadn't he, Gilland, just destroyed the state?

The baby started crying again, and he reached absently into his pocket for another cigarette.

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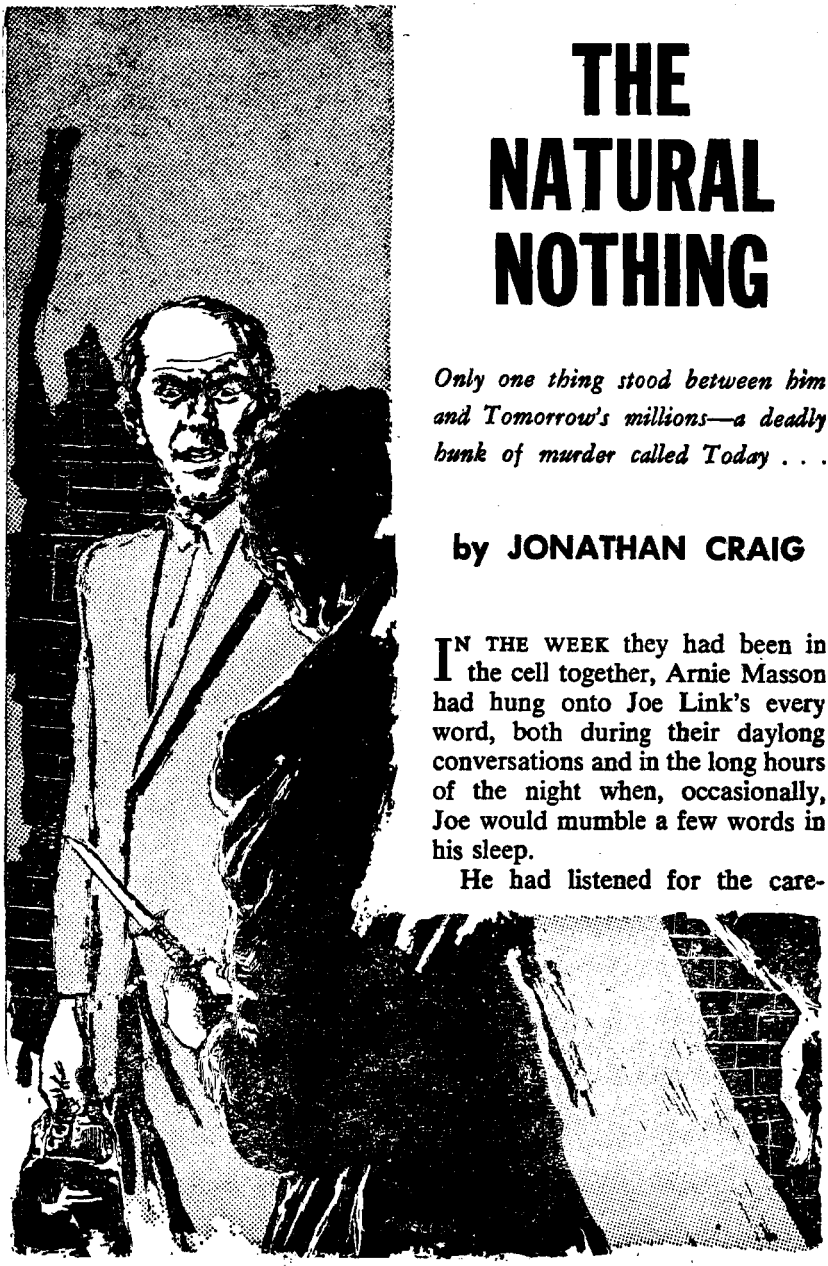

THE NATURAL NOTHING

Only one thing stood between him and Tomorrow's millions—a deadly hunk of murder called Today . . .

by JONATHAN CRAIG

IN THE WEEK they had been in the cell together, Arnie Masson had hung onto Joe Link's every word, both during their daylong conversations and in the long hours of the night when, occasionally, Joe would mumble a few words in his sleep.

He had listened for the care-

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less word, the unguarded phrase, the sleep-blurred name of a street, a shop. And slowly those few scattered words and phrases had shaped themselves into the knowledge that was going to provide Arnie with the good life from here on in.

Now, on the morning he was to be released, Arnie found it almost impossible to conceal his impatience. He was to be let out at noon. By three o'clock, four at the latest, he would be in possession of two hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewels. Diamonds. A heaping double handful of flawless stones small enough to sell anywhere, a few at a time and in many different places, without raising questions of any kind whatever.

It would take iron nerve to pull something like this, especially on a trigger-happy killer like Joe Link; but an opportunity such as this one, a chance to score so heavily and so easily, came to only one man in thousands, and it would certainly never come to any man twice.

The odds against his ever being in the same cell with Joe Link—both of them on short-time stays for separate and unrelated counts of disorderly conduct—were enormous; the odds against Joe's telling Arnie so much, all unknowingly were beyond computation.

Arnie Masson lay motionless on his steel-mesh bunk, hands folded behind his head, studying Joe Link as the big man stopped his pacing long enough to grind out one cigarette beneath his heel and light another.

"Tough about that detention order, Joe," he said. "If those Oklahoma cops had held off a couple more hours, you'd be hitting the street with me today."

Joe Link glanced at him contemptuously and resumed his pacing—a tall, prematurely bald young man with a flat, sullen face and pale green eyes with tiny hoods at their outer corners.

"I might've hit the street with you," Joe said, "but that's where we'd split. I don't waste time with errand boys like you, Arnie. Not a minute."

Arnie smiled. "We can't all be big-time jewel heisters like you, Joe," he said. "Somebody has to—"

"Yeah, I know," Joe said. "Somebody has to run out for coffee. Somebody had to run the errands. Somebody like you. You're a natural nothing, Arnie. A zero."

"You've been talking like that ever since they threw you in here," Arnie said carefully. "What'd I ever do to bug you, anyhow?"

"A nothing like you don't have to do anything to bug somebody. All he has to do is be around."

Arnie shifted his position slightly. "When will those Oklahoma cops get here?"

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"I told you twice already. Tonight."

"You worried?"

"I told you that already, too. No. They want to talk to me about some heist in Ardmore. Hell, I never even been in Ardmore. Either some fink down there gave them the wrong steer, or they just want to make a little trip at the state's expense. Either way, I'll be out this time tomorrow morning."

"Maybe we ought to get together sometime, Joe. Maybe talk over a job or two. Who knows, we just might work up something pretty—"

"Not *we*. Arnie. Not you and me. You're just an errand boy for any outfit that can stand to have you around. Me, I'm strictly a loner. I don't need nobody else, ever. And even if I did, I wouldn't come looking for the likes of you. The next time you see me on the street, do me a favor. Cross over to the other side."

It was true, Arnie Masson knew. He was nothing. A small-time grifter, a two-bit thief. A hanger-on around many mobs, but never an accepted member of any of them.

He was just a man who was around. A coffee runner. An errand boy.

But that was now. By tonight, all that would be changed. Neither Joe Link nor anyone else would ever think of him as an errand boy again. Never.

Arnie laughed.

"All right, Joe," he said. "So I'm not top man with you. So okay."

"You got it wrong," Joe said. "You are top man, Arnie. You're top man on one of my lists. You know what list, don't you?"

Arnie sighed resignedly. "All right," he said. "Like you say, Joe, I'll cross over to the other side."

Forty minutes later, Arnie Masson had signed for the possessions, including sixty-one dollars in cash, taken from him at the time he was jailed, and was on his way crosstown in a cab. As he rode, he reviewed once again the story he had been able to put together from Joe Link's slips and the brief account in the single newspaper he had been able to read in the jail.

It had been a felony murder. Joe Link had shot and almost killed a guard at the jewelry store from which he had taken the diamonds. In his stolen getaway car, Joe had put the diamonds in the false bottom of an empty doctor's bag, as he had done on other jobs in the past, since a well-dressed man carrying such a bag would be an unlikely person to arouse suspicion.

When, half a dozen blocks away, a police cruiser had begun to close in on him, he had aban-

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doned the car and his gun and fled on foot—straight into a dead-end street.

Discovering that he was trapped, with the police likely to enter the street at any moment, Joe's first concern had been to rid himself, but only temporarily, of incriminating evidence. The three balls of a pawn shop had given him an idea, and he had gone inside and hocked the bag with the jewels still secreted in the bottom.

Then he had gone into the gift shop next door, bought a greeting card and a stamp, and used the courtesy desk to address the envelope to himself at the rooming house where he lived.

On the street again, Joe Link had put the pawn ticket in the envelope with the card, dropped the envelope in a mailbox, and stepped into a cab. Once out of the neighborhood, he had left the cab, had several drinks too many in a bar, got into a fight with another patron, and landed in a cell.

What the other details were, Arnie didn't know and cared even less. The important thing was that the diamonds were still in the hock shop and the pawn ticket was still at Joe Link's rooming house. He didn't know which hock shop Joe had gone to, but the name would be on the pawn ticket.

Although he didn't know the address of Joe's rooming house, Joe had said once that he lived next door to the Hi-Lo Tavern, a place Arnie recalled having passed several times.

"Here's your corner, Bud," the cab driver said, pulling to the curb.

Bud, Arnie thought as he got out. Even cabbies think I'm nothing. "But not for long," he said as he reached for his wallet.

"How's that?" the driver asked.

"Thinking out loud," Arnie said. "Keep the change."

He stood looking across the street at the Hi-Lo Tavern, a dreary-looking neighborhood saloon wedged between a small office building and a three-story frame house. Joe Link's rooming house, Arnie Masson reflected; there was no choice.

The woman who answered his ring at the front door was heavy set and middle aged, shapeless in a faded pink wrapper.

"Yes?" she said, rheumy blue eyes disapproving beneath unplucked gray brows like steel wool. "What'd you want?"

"I need a room," Arnie said.

She was appraising him and making no secret of it. The seconds dragged on. "I might let you have a first floor rear," she said at last, as if she were acting against her better judgment. "Fifteen dollars a week, in advance."

Arnie Masson took a ten and a five from his wallet, handed them to her, and followed her down a dank, dimly-lit hallway to the last door on the right.

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"No cooking or girls in here," the woman said. "The bathroom's across the hall. Keep it clean. I put the mail on the table by the door every morning. That pay phone out there is for emergencies only. And not only no cooking, but don't bring any food in here at all. I don't want any more bugs than I got already. Everything okay now, Mr.—?"

"Lockner," Arnie said. It was as good a name as any.

"All right, Mr. Lockner. One more thing. I don't stand for loudmouths and boozers. All okay, fella?"

"All okay," Arnie said.

She went away and Arnie Masson sat down on the side of the swaybacked bed, listening to the muffled pound of her heavy feet as she climbed the stairs.

Fella, he thought. *Fella, Bud, Buster, Mac.* She'd talk a different way the next time; hard-nosed landladies just didn't figure in his future at all.

He got up, went back down the hall, took the directory from its shelf beneath the phone on the wall, and opened it on the mail table, so that if anyone came past they would think he was looking for a phone number. He stood leaning over the directory, one finger moving slowly down a column of names, while his eyes searched the scattering of mail on the table.

It was there. A long, shadow-striped envelope addressed to Mr. Joseph Link. He glanced down the hallway in the direction of the stairs, and then hurriedly put the envelope in his pocket, returned the directory to its shelf, and left the house.

Around the corner, he paused, opened the envelope took the pawn ticket from inside it, and dropped the envelope and greeting card in a trash basket at the curb. The pawn ticket was imprinted with the name and address of the Liberal Loan Company, and bore the usual date and transaction number.

Arnie hailed the next cab that passed.

"Eight Seventeen North Franklin," he told the driver. "And I'm kind of in a hurry."

The driver's lips spread with open amusement. "No kidding?" he said. "Real big deal cooking, huh?"

Arnie Masson said nothing. Another one, he thought. How many times had he gone through this kind of thing? Too many, for too many years.

"You're one of these hotshot

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big executives, right?" the driver said, grinning at Arnie in the rear-view mirror.

"Oh, sure," Arnie said.

"I knew it," the driver said. "I could see you was somebody important the second I saw you. It sticks out all over you."

"Never mind," Arnie said tightly. "Just drive."

The three gilded globes above the entrance of the Liberal Loan Company shimmered in the early afternoon sun. Arnie opened the door and walked through the ceiling-high clutter of the shop to the counter at the rear. The thin-faced man behind the counter stared at him unblinkingly through faintly tinted glasses and said nothing. Arnie handed him the pawn ticket.

"I'd like to get this back," he said.

The man took the ticket, matched it against his stub book, disappeared behind a stack of luggage for a moment, and came back with a black leather doctor's bag.

"Altogether, nine-fifty," he said.

Arnie paid him, picked up the bag, and turned toward the door.

"Thank you—Doctor," the man said, with just enough pause before the last word to let Arnie know it was intentional. "Come in again."

But to Arnie Masson, striding toward the door, the sarcasm meant nothing. The knowledge that he was carrying two hundred thousand dollars' worth of diamonds, his diamonds, had given him a feeling of such heady elation that nothing could touch him. Money made the man, and he was a man now two hundred thousand dollars' worth.

As he came out on the sidewalk and turned toward the open end of the dead-end street, he forced himself to walk slower than he felt like walking, and he somehow kept from breaking out in a wide smile of sheer joy.

He was somebody, now; the old Arnie Masson was no more. He felt an almost overpowering compulsion to laugh out loud, to do something to express just how wonderful—

"Hello, Arnie," a man's harsh voice said from three feet away, and Arnie's eyes jerked toward the doorway at his right.

Joe Link stood there, a strange smile on his flat-featured face and his hooded eyes as cold-looking as green ice. He held a folded newspaper in a way that hid his right hand and the gun that Arnie knew very well was in it.

"Come here, Arnie," Joe said softly.

Arnie felt something cold twist inside him. He stood motionless. People passed him, jostled him, turned to glare at him.

Joe looked down at his newspaper meaningfully. "I said come here, Arnie."

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Arnie took a slow step toward him, then another.

"Inside," Joe said, jerking his head toward the door behind him.

Arnie opened the door and stepped inside. It was the bare lobby of a loft building. There was a narrow stairway and the yawning open door of a freight elevator and nothing else.

"Over there," Joe said. "Back away from the door."

"Joe," Arnie said. "Joe, listen. I—"

"You finally figured it out?" Joe said. "You see now how I conned you into doing me a favor?" He was still smiling, and now his smile widened. "I figured if I fed you just enough to put two and two together, you'd do it, and I was right. You thought you was being real bright, didn't you? You was so bright you even believed that bull about those Oklahoma cops getting a hold order on me."

Arnie wet his lips. "But why, Joe? Why would you—?"

"Why? Because the cops might've found out what I did with that loot. They might've had a trap set up for me at the pawn shop or where I live or both. I figured, why take a chance when I could dupe you into doing it for me? If there was a trap, and they got you, too bad. If there wasn't, and you got the loot for me, fine."

Arnie Masson tried to say something, but somehow he couldn't force the words past his lips.

"Like I told you, Arnie," Joe said, "you're only good to run errands. And that's just what I got you to do for me—run an errand."

He drew his hand from beneath the newspaper. It wasn't a gun he had hidden there, but a knife. "The trouble is, I told you more than is healthy for me. I couldn't have you walking around, knowing what you know."

"God, Joe," Arnie whispered. "Don't—"

"Too bad, Arnie," Joe Link said as he stepped close. "Thanks for the favor, errand boy."

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A Taut Novelet of Gangland Reckoning

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MURDER ON MY MIND

by I. G. EDMONDS

A murder king had just handed Greg gangdom's payoff for a double-cross—a one-way ticket to hell!

SHE CAME into my office like a stripper swaying down the runway at a lower Main Street burlesque house. The way she twisted I expected to see her start peeling at any minute.

But she didn't. She perched on the edge of my desk. Her skirt was pulled so tight that I wondered why the threads didn't go *pop! pop! pop!* That would have matched the way my heart was going *bump! bump! bump!*

Only part of the thump under my ribs was uneasiness. I knew that this gorgeous blonde had brought trouble to every man crazy enough to get tied up with her. Watching her closely, it seemed to me that she was trying to mask the fact that she was scared to death herself.

"It's been a long time, Greg-honey," she said.

Lili Foster had a way of talking as if her mouth was on fire and she had to get the words out fast to save them. They tumbled over each other and smoked.

"Not long enough, Lili," I replied.

She glared. The hard blue eyes in her soft pink face showered me with sparks.

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"What's the matter?" she snapped. "You seemed damned glad to get me off in the dark at that strip party!"

"In my youthful innocence I didn't know that the meanest hood since Bugsy Ziegler had a deed on you in form of a marriage certificate."

Her face contorted. "That creep! He and I are through!"

"You shouldn't have any trouble getting rid of him," I said. "You've had a lot of practice. Is this the eighth husband you've shed?"

"It's the sixth," she said. "And don't get nasty. The others were gentlemen about it and made settlements without arguing. This slimy jerk expects to kick me out in the street without so much as the clothes on my back!"

"That should be an interesting sight," I said dryly.

"Well, he won't get away with it!" she said. "I let him know it too. And now—"

The mask fell away and I saw the naked fear in her face. She dropped a manila envelope she had under her arm. I reached to pick it up for her, but she snatched it up as if it meant all the world to her.

"And now," she went on, almost choking, "the crumb is trying to bump me off! He won't get away with that either!"

I wasn't so sure. Her husband, Frankie Foster, was top dog in the West Coast crime syndicate. He was a mean little punk who had climbed to the top on a ladder of dead bodies of men who had got in his way.

He was quite capable of shooting a discarded wife rather than pay alimony.

"He won't get away with it," Lili repeated. "I'm getting me a bodyguard."

"Who," I asked, "will you find crazy enough to buck Frankie's torpedos?"

"You!" she said.

"Not on your sweet—and probably short—life, dear!"

"Scared?" she said nastily.

"*Prudent* is the word I prefer, but have it your way."

"You, the guy they call Big Eye, toughest private detective on the West Coast! Boy! Have you got the public fooled!"

I got a little red, but not red enough to jump into the fire with her.

"Deal me out, Lili," I said. "I'm a lover, not a fighter."

Her face turned into a lazy smile. "Well, after all, we'll have to find something to pass the time while you guard me."

"No go, Lili." I said. The way I said it, she knew I meant what I said.

"No guts, you mean!" She jumped up and folded the manila envelope, jamming it into her oversize purse. It was bulky and barely went inside. She flounced to the

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door and shot me back a dirty look as she slammed it behind her.

That surprised me. Lili was not one to give up so easily. The disturbing thought hit me that she never expected me to take up her proposition. If that were true, why did she bother to come see me?

I did not have time to puzzle on her most un-Lili-like actions. The door opened again and the pretty blonde head of my secretary peered in suspiciously.

"I thought you had more sense!" she said.

"Just because I nearly proposed to you last night as the only alternative to outright attack does not give you the right to act like a housewife today. I'm boss, remember?"

She tossed her head. "Don't change the subject. That woman is poison. Don't you know who she is?"

"I know," I said irritably. "And I resisted her charms as decisively as you rejected mine last night."

"Who are you trying to kid?" she snapped. "You agreed to help her. I never saw such a look of satisfaction on any woman's face as she had when she went out the door."

That raised me up on my hoofs. I suddenly felt an itch between my shoulder blades. It was the exact spot I could expect her gangster husband to aim his gun. What Lana said only bore out my suspicions that Lili Foster was trying to mix me up in something.

She did not expect me to bite on it easily. She just wanted to be seen coming into my office and leaving looking happy. That way, whoever was tailing her would assume that I had taken her case.

"I'll be back in a minute," I told Lana grimly.

I beat it for the lobby four stories down, but she had already gone. I cursed.

I asked the doorman. He remembered her. Everybody remembers Lili.

"Sure," he said. "You just missed her, Mr. Graves. She dumped a manila envelope in the trash can over there and beat it out the door."

I looked out in the street, but the crowd was on the way home. I couldn't see her anywhere.

I came back to the trash can. I found the package she threw away. All it had in it were some folded newspapers.

Again I got that itchy feeling between my shoulders. Lili wanted somebody to think she left that damned package with me. I couldn't figure why, but I intended to find out. I had a hunch that I was in trouble if I did not. I went back upstairs.

As I opened the door into the reception room of my office I heard Lana's angry voice from my inner office.

"You can't come in here!" she cried. "Get out or I'll call the police!

Then a man's deep voice replied. "If you don't want to get slapped

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around, you'll tell me what Graves did with that package Foster's broad gave him."

"He didn't—" Lana began and her protest was cut off by a sound of a hand smacking hard against a face.

When I got to the door I saw a burly gorilla holding tight to Lana's wrist to keep her from running. Her face was red where he clobbered her.

I leaped for him with murder on my mind. Lana, even though I hated her usually fifty minutes out of each hour, was my property—I liked to hope. I intended to take that hood apart joint by joint for touching what was mine.

He heard me charging him. He jerked around, swung Lana by the arm. She crashed into me. We both fell. The gorilla's hand stabbed for his shoulder holster.

I kicked the desk chair into him. He took a dive. Before he could recover I hit him with two hundred ten pounds of Greg Graves. He folded.

I jerked him up and slammed him back against the wall. He looked at me like he saw three men. He only saw one mad enough for three.

I made some pertinent comment on his possible parentage. I told him he could talk or he could understudy a hunk of raw hamburger. I intended to run him through the grinder.

"I don't know nothing," he mumbled. "I just do what Frankie tells me. I don't ask why."

"Okay. What did he tell you to do?"

"He said to get that package that blonde broad had and do anything I had to do to get it. He said if she got to you with it, to leave you a message."

"What is the message?"

"He said he'd smash you like a bug if you got mixed up in this mess."

I gave him a hard stare. There wasn't much use trying to get anything else out of him. I doubted if he knew anything. Instead I tried the soft sell. I didn't deny that I had the package. Lili had set things up so neatly I never expected to convince Frankie Foster that she had not planted it with me.

Instead I said, "How did you tumble to me?"

"Frankie called me downtown and said she had a package he wanted and to get it before she gave it to you."

Obviously Lili knew she was being tailed and took care to stage her visit to me so that her husband would think I had the package he wanted.

Why did she pick me for the fall guy? That was easy to figure. She knew me and knew that twice I had successfully bucked her tough husband. She figured he feared me more than anyone she could get. That might be true, but the trouble was I was scared of him too.

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The hood had more spunk than I gave him credit for. While I was trying to make up my mind what to do with him, he suddenly drove his fist up to the elbow in my belly. I wasn't prepared and it doubled me up. He flattened me with a clout and beat it for the door as an inkwell hurled by Lana smashed the wall at his head.

He turned as he went out, throwing this back at me: "Frankie wants that package, Big Eye! Or he wants you dead! What Frankie wants he gets!"

I straightened painfully and eased into the chair. Lana looked at me with genuine concern. I denied I was hurt.

"I'm afraid for you, Greg," she whispered.

"Don't worry about me. Worry about that crumb," I said roughly.

I didn't mean to speak so sharply to her, but it galled my soul to have that hood put one over on me while she watched. In the ordinary course of events we all win one and lose one. It doesn't worry me to fail unless one of my women happens to be watching. Then I want to win, and it ties my soul in little knots when I don't.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Forget it until tomorrow," I said. "Right now I've got to tie up some loose ends on that Romier case. Why don't you go on home? I'll follow as soon as I make some calls."

"Will I see you tonight?" There was a suspicion behind her words.

She suspected rightly that I was soon off to see Lili Foster and I couldn't admit it to her. She would demand to go along. I headed that off by telling her I would see her at eight.

WHEN LANA LEFT I called a reporter I knew who had been filing stories on the marital explosions between Lana and her husband. I figured he would know where she was staying, now that she had gotten bored with her husband's bread and board.

When I got down to the street level I stopped outside the building and looked around. A very good habit for anyone in my kind of business.

Most of the office crowd had gone and the street was nearly

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empty. Across from my building I saw a Ford parked at the curb. The driver was behind the wheel and it seemed to me that he had been watching the front of my building until I came out. Now he had an interest in everything but me.

I waited for a break in the traffic and jaywalked across to him. He looked startled. His hand shifted nervously inside his buttoned jacket. Then it dropped away. He knew as well as I that shooting people in downtown Los Angeles has gone out of style. The police chief we have now is hard to get along with.

I put my hands on the edge of the front door as if I just wanted to talk. I recognized him as one of Frankie Foster's goons. Then I suddenly reached inside and jerked the keys out of the ignition. He grabbed my wrist, but I jerked free. I turned and tossed the keys down a nearby storm drain.

Neither one of us said a word, but there was murder in the gorilla's face. I gave him my best smile—which was definitely wasted on him—and went on to my car in a lot farther down the street. I drove off, secure in the knowledge that if I were to be followed, it would not be by him.

It took me twenty minutes to get to the apartment-hotel out Santa Monica way where Lili had holed up. As I parked I saw another of those common-looking cars parked across and slightly down the street.

In the dark I could not see the features of the man sitting behind the wheel, but I didn't doubt that he was Frankie's man. There wasn't much I could do about it. So I shrugged it off and went inside.

The snooty lobby clerk refused to let me go up until she okayed it. He put a call through to her room. She was downright nasty about me seeing her. Apparently she wanted no more contact with me.

"I'm not leaving until I talk with you!"

"But if Frankie—!" she protested.

I cut her off.

"This will not take more than five minutes," I said.

"No longer?"

"No longer."

"Well, come on up, but I want you out of here as soon as possible."

"I thought you wanted me around all the time," I said.

There was a pause.

"I've changed my mind," she said.

If I could have believed her, I'd have turned around and gone back home to Lana right then. But there was an uneasy something in her voice that told me that I had not yet been eliminated from this mess Lili was stirring up. Her voice was too evasive.

Lili had a deluxe pad on the third floor. She met me at the door with a gun in her hand. She backed off where it would be fatal for me to jump her. I guess she figured—

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correctly—that I intended to slap her around if she tried to hold back on what I wanted to know.

I hate guys who slap women around, but Lili is an exception. It's the only way anyone can treat her.

She nodded toward a portable bar. "Help yourself."

She crossed the room and pulled back a sliding glass door behind some floor length drapes. It opened on to a small balcony rimmed by a wrought iron rail.

"Frankie knows I'm here," she said, crossing the room toward me. She spoke nervously, but the gun in her hand was pointed steadily in my direction. "I think I've got him scared to touch me now, but I can't be sure. Anyway, he must not find you and me together. If he comes, get out on the balcony quick."

"Okay," I said. "You look beautiful in that thing. What's it made of? Spider webs?"

She ignored the compliment. That alone showed how nervous she was.

"Pour me one too," she said. "Make it straight."

She swayed slightly. I caught a whiff of her breath. She was nervous, angry and drunk. In that condition and with that gun in her hand, it would take little to put her in the gas chamber and me in the cemetery.

I handed her the shot. She downed it like water, while her eyes bored into me over the rim of the glass. She tossed the glass disdainfully on the carpet when she finished.

She belched and said, "Well, what the hell do you want?"

"After you left, one of Frankie's boys came to see me," I said.

"I don't give a damn about your visitors," she retorted.

"We discussed you."

"Every man I ever met discusses me. So what else is new? Say what you have to say and get out!"

"Frankie thinks you left some incriminating papers with me. He also thinks I'm not going to live long if I don't get them back to him."

"So you expect me to hand them over, huh? And lose the only hold I have to keep him from blasting me?"

She added some additional words that fried as they hit the air. She swayed slightly; that last drink was turning her eyes glassy. Suddenly she did an about-face, smiling at me.

"If I give it to you straight, will you go?" she asked.

"I'll be delighted," I said and meant it.

All I wanted to know was what I faced so I could prepare myself for the worst. It's suicide to get into something involving Frankie Foster without knowing the score.

Lili gave a hard laugh. "Listen and weep, Big Eye. Frankie tried to kiss me off without a dime settlement. What could I do? Sue? He

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doesn't keep a damn thing in his name so he can beat the income tax. On the record, he's a pauper."

"So you're trying to pull a fast one on him?"

"I have him in a squeeze," she said. "He keeps his mouth closed in public, but he is an insecure little jerk. He likes to rattle his teeth in the bedroom to show me what a smart cookie he is. Sometimes when he was drunk he spilled too much. I remembered these things."

"Lili, you aren't crazy enough to try to blackmail a man like Frankie Foster?"

"What's blackmail? I'm getting what's coming to me!"

"You may at that," I said.

What worried me was that I might get what I didn't feel was coming to me. I was starting to see why she came to me.

"One night he was really looped," she went on, "he bragged about being bigger than the Congress of the United States. He told how he just put the squeeze on a Senator to head off investigation of a bank Augie Millier was using to transfer credits to finance an international narcotics ring."

I knew Augie Millier. He was Mr. Big in the Eastern rackets—the man who told Frankie Foster what to do. From what I heard, Augie was not too happy with the way Frankie was running the West Coast section of the crime empire.

"The Congressman balked on this raw deal and Augie told Frankie to see him in Los Angeles. Frankie showed the Senator some cancelled checks, a forged contract and some other material that would blow him out of Congress."

Frankie, she went on to say, showed this blast-off material to the congressman and opposition to going along with the gang wilted. Frankie had the material with him when he came home that night. It was kept, along with other blackmail-type evidence, in a safety deposit box in the crook-dominated bank. There was no way Foster could return it that night.

It was so important he kept it on his person. It was important not only because it was a lever over the Senator, but it also incriminated Frankie and Augie. The material, I gathered from Lili, was dynamite, but could not be destroyed as long as the gang needed to keep the Senator in line.

"I racked my brain for some way to steal the papers out and get photostats of them while he slept," Lili went on. "Frankie was out; dead drunk. But I didn't dare leave. I read them, though."

Then, after their breakup this afternoon, she called Frankie on the phone about his reluctance to pay her off.

"I was afraid to tell him in person," she said, swaying drunkenly, but keeping that damned gun pointed at my belly. "He almost blew the telephone line when I told him I had a copy of the papers and

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was turning them over to you. You'd give them to the police if anything happened to me!"

"Why me?" I asked.

"He's afraid of you. You stood him on his ear twice."

"But there are no copies of the documents?"

She giggled in almost nervous hysteria. "I conned the skunk!" she said. "I told him what was in them so he knows I had them in my hand. He's scared stiff. Augie Millier will cut his throat if he finds out."

"But what are you going to do?" I asked.

"He's going to pay me a million dollars. Then I'm going to Europe where he can't touch me."

"You can't get away with it, Lili," I said.

"Sure I can. He can't touch me. He thinks you have the papers. Don't forget that."

"What happens if he bumps me off?"

She shrugged. "You can take care of yourself. That's why I picked you for my partner."

"Not partner," I said bitterly. "Fall guy!"

Suddenly her manner changed and I glimpsed what she really had in her mad mind.

"There is only one way out now for both of us!" she whispered huskily, coming close to me.

She had apparently forgotten the gun and I could have easily twisted it out of her hand. But I waited, uneasily wondering what strange proposition she would make.

"He'll kill us if he can, Greg!" she whispered fiercely. "So you must get him first! It's the only way!"

"You damned fool!" I said. "It would easier to assassinate Castro!"

"No, I'll call him and tell him I'm giving him the copies. He'll come here alone. He doesn't want anyone to know what is missing. You wait in the bedroom—"

She paused, her eyes glittering drunkenly.

"And," she went on, looking at me gloatingly through half-closed lids, "he has a fifty thousand dollar insurance policy. I'm still his wife. It'll be mine. And I'll be yours!"

If I had told her no, I think she would have shot me. I've never seen a woman so wrought up as she was then.

"Maybe," I said, humoring her fear and drunken madness.

She pressed against me. Her hand went around my neck. I reached down and caught her wrist. I twisted violently, trying to break her grip on the gun.

Ex-strippers like Lili aren't cream puff. They are as tough as the racket they are in. She clung to the gun and raked my face with the claws on her free hand. We struggled and fell. It was like wrestling a greased pig.

As we rolled on the floor, the door opened. Four men were behind the frightened desk clerk

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they forced to open the door with his pass key. In my anxiety at what Lili told me, I'd forgotten Frankie's stakeout in front of the apartment. He must have called his boss and told him I was there.

Lili broke loose from me. Her face was transfixed with the most awful fear. She was looking death in the face and knew it. She was too befuddled by fear and liquor to think straight. She did the worst possible thing. She jerked up her gun and tried to fire at the gang chief. Frankie shot first. Her bullet came a split second later than his so it sounded like one report. Her shot smashed into the wall. His ripped right between her fancy breasts.

Frankie cursed. He had not wanted to kill her yet. Lili had forced him into it. But he didn't panic. He ordered one of the men to take the desk clerk downstairs and make sure he knew what to tell the police. Then he told them to grab me.

"You two might have gotten away with this shakedown if you had had sense enough to keep separated. Then I would never have known which one had—what I want," he said contemptuously as his two hoods bent me back over the couch.

Frankie wiped the murder gun free of his fingerprints and forced my resisting fingers down on the butt. I struggled wildly and someone tapped my head with a gun. I wilted, but did not completely lose consciousness.

"Get him down to the car," I dimly heard Frankie say. "We got to get out of here fast."

I stayed limp. I thought I'd have a better chance of making a break if they thought I was out. I thought that I had had it. I could just see the police finding that gun with my prints on it beside Lili. An all-points bulletin would be put on the circuit for my arrest. Then my body would be found along a lonely stretch of coast—a "suicide." Case closed.

All I could hope for was that some tenant in the place had heard the shot and called the police. I might have an impossible time convincing a jury that my prints had been put on the gun forcibly. But my trial for murdering Lili was a long way off yet. The State of California would have to convict me before they killed me. On the other hand I had already been convicted in Frankie Foster's court and was even then walking that last mile.

But the cops didn't come. Why in hell can't life be like a book?

THEY DRAGGED me out the back and shoved me in the rear seat of a car. I was wedged in between the two goons. Foster slid under the wheel himself. The driver was still taking care of the desk clerk, I supposed.

Frankie started to pull along the

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driveway at the side of the house, but in the distance we heard the wail of a police siren. Someone in the house must have called the police after all.

Frankie did not give me time to hope. He said back over his shoulder, "Don't panic. When the crash car hits them, we'll make a break for it."

I knew what he was talking about. It's an old gangster trick. The car carrying the torpedos scheduled to do the dirty work is followed by a second car. If there is police pursuit, the crash car "accidently" runs into the police car. The other car then gets away. The worst that can be proven on the driver of the crash car is carelessness.

I was still flopped limply between my captors, but I could see the lights of the on-coming police car. As it slowed to stop in front of the apartment, the crash car suddenly pulled from the curb into its path.

The prowl car swerved. I could see the grim face of the driver limned by the lights of the crash car. He was frantically spinning the wheel. He almost made it, but as the two cars whipped by each other, their rear fenders crashed together.

The bump threw the police car off course. It jumped the curb and headed across the driveway in our direction. It missed our front bumper by the thickness of a cigarette paper and plowed with a squeal of brakes into a thick hedge.

Frankie raced us out into the street and took a turn on two wheels. It had been a long time since he had taken part in something like this. But he obviously had not forgotten his old-time technique.

The police car was not badly damaged. It pulled back and tried to follow. Frankie ran a red light at the first intersection and made a right turn. Our pursuers made the same turn, but seconds later their car swerved.

"I think they blew a tire," one of the goons said to Frankie. "Must have gotten cut when the fenders banged with Sollie."

Frankie made a quick turn into a park and cut his speed to avoid attracting notice.

"See anybody following?" he said back over his shoulder.

I figured I'd have no better chance. I threw out both hands and grabbed me a fistful of hair from both men. I jerked their heads over in front of me, crashing their skulls together.

Frankie yelled and dragged at

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the gun in his shoulder holster. I gave him a rabbit punch. The car jerked and stalled. I hit the door catch and plunged headfirst out into the darkness.

The car was still rolling. I hit heavily, I suppose, but I felt nothing. I rolled and came up on my feet. I plunged into a thick hedge of oleander beside the darkened park road.

Frankie and one of the goons piled out. The other just sat in the back seat groaning. Frankie jerked him out.

I heard Foster say, "I got to get rid of this car. It might have been recognized. I'm leaving you two to get him. It's your only chance to square yourself with me for letting him get away."

"We'll get him, Frankie," one of the goons mumbled.

"You had better!" Foster snarled. "Don't kill him. Not here. I want something from him before he—becomes a suicide!"

"We'll need wheels to get him out, Frankie."

"Tim is at the apartment making sure that damn clerk is wised up to tell the police nobody went to Lili's rooms tonight except Graves. He'll drive you back. I told him to stay there as a stakeout to see what the police did."

Frankie got back in the car. I started to crawl cautiously along the hedge row. The way I saw it, I had one slim chance to get out of part of this mess. It was possible that the police had not yet discovered Lili's body.

The police car that answered the complaint was drawn away by pursuit of Frankie's car. I looked at my watch. That had only been seven minutes ago. That surprised me. It seemed like seven days.

There just might be time for me to get back to that apartment ahead of the homicide squad and wipe my fingerprints off the murder weapon.

If that failed, then I probably had it. There would be nothing I could do but run. And where could I run to? Absconding bank presidents have the coin to go to countries where the U.S. has no extradition treaties. Near paupers like me can only scurry from one hole to another. I'd rather be dead than live a fugitive's life.

I crawled as far as I could under cover, then jumped up and made a break for it across a wide clear grassy area. The goons cut across after me. One pulled away from the other. He was big and clumsy looking, but he could run like a football coach's dream.

I headed through a child's playground area. He was almost on top of me. I caught the stand pole of a swing and used it for leverage to make a quick turn. This gained me a second. I whirled and caught one of the swings. I hurled it at him. He ducked and his feet slipped in the sand.

This gave me the advantage I needed. I outdistanced him to the

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edge of the park and he lost me in the hedges that separated the area from the street.

The apartment was half a block away now. I almost dropped with relief. There were no cars with flashing red lights in front of it. I began to hope that I would make it, after all. I crossed the street and looked back. I could see the shadowy figures of my pursuers, but didn't give a damn now. I was sure I was going to get to the apartment ahead of them. I doubted that they had the guts to follow me in it.

I was afraid to risk going through the lobby. The back door opened only from the inside. I figured climbing the balconies was my best bet. They were on the dark side and there were no lights in any of them except Lili's. I figured it for a cinch. There was a patio on the ground floor and I scaled the grape arbor over it. This gave me a boost up to the balcony of the second floor.

I did a fair imitation of Tarzan and pulled myself over the rail. I was now just one floor below Lili's apartment. I climbed on the rail, reaching up for a grip on the edge of her balcony.

Then the wail of a police siren split the air. One police car stopped in front of the building. The second cut up the driveway. I ducked back down to keep its lights from revealing me clinging to the railing.

I pressed against the wall, desperate, but not willing to retreat yet. The car stopped below and two men piled out. They ran to the back of the apartment.

I leaped up on the rail, grabbed a hold above and pulled myself up to the balcony of Lili's apartment. I still hoped to get into the room before the police got up the elevator from the lobby.

But I had no sooner cleared the rail than I knew I had failed. The drapes were drawn, but the sliding door was still cracked as Lili left it. I heard the voice of Lieutenant Scott Bradley from the homicide squad.

"It's the Foster broad," he said. "The tip was straight."

"Who called you?" a companion asked.

"I don't know, Paul," Bradley said. "The caller just said that Greg Graves had shot Foster's wife because she threatened to break off with Graves and go back to her husband."

"There's a gun over there. It looks like fingerprints on it," Paul said. "There are some kind of smudges on the butt. "Surely Graves had more sense than that."

Bradley grunted, "When a man gets panicky there is no telling what he will do."

His voice sounded nearer. I pressed against the stucco, my fist cocked to lay him out if he saw me.

He stuck his head out and looked at the ground.

"If it was Graves, he's athletic enough to have got out this way,"

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he said. "Have someone check the grounds later for footprints, Paul."

He pulled his head back in, and I let my breath out in a sigh of relief.

"We won't know if those are Graves' prints on that gun until we check," Bradley said. "But I'm going to put out an all-points bulletin to pick him up on suspicion anyway."

"Hey! There has been only one shot fired from this gun, Lieutenant," Paul said. "But there's one bullet in her and one in the wall."

"Look around for another gun," Bradley said.

I didn't hang around to hear any more. I couldn't see any police on the driveway, but I thought I saw one of Frankie's goons lurking back of the hedge that separated the apartment house from the adjoining property.

Still I had no choice. I had to take a chance. I swung over the rail and down to the second floor balcony. From there it was just a drop to the driveway.

I bent half double and cut into the hedge. A gun jammed into my ribs and a deadly voice said, "Don't move, Graves!"

I knew he was there somewhere, but I had no choice. I had to get off that balcony. My captor marched me back across the adjoining property and into an alley that led to the opposite street. We stopped at a parked car.

"Get in," he said.

"To hell with you," I retorted. I figured he did not dare shoot me there.

He shifted the gun to his left hand and slammed me in the belly with his right fist. I saw it coming and tried to harden my muscles to take it, but I was still sore from the jolt I took in my office. My captor put everything he had behind the blow. It doubled me up. He jerked open the car door and shoved me in.

I fell on my shoulders with my head against the floor mat and my legs on the seat. I was in misery and couldn't move. He shoved the gun in his pocket and pulled a roll of surgical tape from the glove compartment. He grabbed one hand and wound tape around my wrists. He tried to roll me over and pull both hands behind my back. I couldn't stop him. I was too sick.

The way I was wedged in, he couldn't budge me. He contented himself with taping my wrists together in front. Then, after tying my ankles in a similar manner, he taped my hands and feet together so I could not club him if I got control of myself again.

IN THIS miserable position I bumped around until I was dragged out of the car. I was shoved into a back entrance of the Silver Star, a nightclub controlled by the same bad boys. I was hustled along to Frankie's private office.

They shoved me into a chair. My

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wrists and ankles were left bound, but they cut the cord holding the two together so I could straighten up. My whole body was numb. It felt like pins were sticking me all over. My belly ached fiercely. Each time I took a breath my head felt like the whole damned top had blown off again.

Frankie waved the others out. He wanted no witnesses to report anything to Augie Millier.

"Ready to make a deal, Graves?" he said when they left.

"It's too late. The police have found the gun beside Lili's body," I said.

In front of me a clock sat on Frankie's desk next to the telephone. I stared at it in surprise. It said eight-thirty. I had been exactly two-and-a-half hours since Lili walked into my office that unhappy December day.

"So they found a gun," Frankie said harshly. "You'll hang if they find the one with your fingerprints on it. Play ball with me and they won't find it."

"I tell you, Bradley has it now," I said. "I was hiding on the balcony when he picked it up."

"Did he?" Frankie asked with a curious smile.

"Didn't he?" I countered, too weary to argue.

"No!" Frankie said. "You're smart, Graves, but any good con man will tell you that it is the smartest ones who are suckered the easiest."

"What in hell are you talking about?"

"The gun the police found by Lili's body was Lili's."

He pulled a hankerchief wrapped package from his pocket. He unfolded the cloth and showed me a gun.

"This is the one that has your prints on it," he said with a grin. "Did you think I was stupid enough to leave my ace behind? I don't have to frame Lili's killing on you to keep my nose clean. I have already arranged for twenty people to swear I never left this place this evening. Some are important people, too. Nobody can break my alibi."

"So?" I said.

"So you were framed for her killing to give me something to bargain with for those papers. Your life, Big Eye!"

All I could do was stall and hope for some kind of break. He was bleating about a deal, but I had nothing to deal with. I cursed Lili for the damned fool that she had been. Nobody bluffs in a game with today's crime syndicate. You had better have the cards to back your bet. I had nothing. Nothing but a big load of fear.

"Give me that package, Graves, and I throw this gun in the Pacific. Cross me and it will be left where the police can find it. Then they'll find you—a suicide. The gun with your prints will give them a reason for your death. They won't start

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any investigation. Your case will go into the solved file."

I didn't deny that I had the papers. He wouldn't have believed me. Instead I said: "Frankie, you got to put more in the pot than my miserable life. I know what's in those papers. If they cause an investigation, it will come out that a Congressman is fronting for you in Washington. The scandal will blow your racket to hell. If that happens Augie Millier is going to blame you, Frankie."

He cursed me.

"I should have killed you a year ago," he said.

"Remember what happened to the last guy when he got his big bosses in a jam?" I taunted him. "I may see you in hell pretty soon, Frankie!"

I was trying to goad him into a fury. The glimmer of a hope started to flicker in my addled brain. I'm not the give-up type for long. I start clutching at straws.

His face flared blood red, but he controlled himself. He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. It was just for hammy effect. The boss' office in a gangster-controlled nightclub is always sound-proofed.

"Okay, Graves. I admit we're both on the spot. The only way out is for both of us to work together."

What he said made sense. The trouble was that he had something to bargain with. I had nothing but a mirage of copies that never existed. He was not going to believe that. Besides, now that I knew of the mob's Washington connections, he could not afford to let me live.

He stared at me, waiting for a reply. My eyes looked past him at the telephone on his desk.

"Oh God!" I thought in agony. "If I could just get my hands on that for twenty seconds—"

"You've got to make a deal, Graves," he said harshly. "Where did you hide those copies?"

"You can't make a deal, Frankie," I said dully. "You tipped off the police about me. I heard Bradley say it. You called them."

"That was just to put pressure on you. They got a fugitive warrant out for you, but without this gun they can't hold you. Do you want Bradley to get it?"

"Frankie, this is the gospel truth. I don't have those copies."

"You know where they are!"

He wasn't going to let me deny it. I didn't intend to. I had the shaky glimmer of an idea.

"Let me tell you what happened," I said.

"Go on," he said harshly.

"Lili came to me. I convinced her that trying to blackmail you was a straight ticket to hell," I said slowly, choosing my words with care so he would believe me.

"I told her I wasn't tough enough to protect her. I told her the only way was for us to kill you. She told me you had a fifty grand insurance policy. As your widow she would collect every dime of it. My price

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for the job was half the insurance money and Lili as long as I wanted her."

He let some words drip off his tongue that caught fire in the air, they were so hot. He was swallowing every word, for there was just enough truth in it to make it believable.

It was just the kind of a double-cross he expected of his vicious wife.

"So I killed you, Frankie!" I said slowly.

"You what?" He took a step backward which almost sent me into dispair. It was the opposite of what I wanted him to do. He had to hit me. Somehow I had to make him mad enough. He eyed me like

he thought I'd thrown a rod in my one-cylinder brain.

"Yeah, I killed you by proxy, Frankie. My first delayed action, remote control murder, Frankie-boy!"

"You're crazy!" he said uneasily. I know he was badly worried. If I flipped my wig, his chance of finding where I'd hidden the supposed copies became impossible.

"Here's how I killed you, Frankie!" I went on, taking a genuine pleasure in the way he flinched as the words jabbed into his skin like hot needles. "I put the papers in an envelope and mailed them to Augie Millier in New York. I put in a note telling him how well you were taking care of his affairs out here!"

He seemed to sag, like a stuffed toy with the sawdust running out.

I kept goading him. "He'll have you taken care of. He'll order the killing. Some hood will pull the trigger, but it was I—good old Greg Graves—who really killed you, Frankie!"

Suddenly he bellowed and hurled himself at me. I was ready. I swung up my bound feet and caught him in the groin as he came at me.

He fell with a terrible cry. I hobbled up and fell to my knees. I tried to club him with my bound hands, but the circulation had been restricted in them so long I could scarcely lift my arms.

I thought I'd lost after all. Frankie was moaning and trying to get up. I jerked my body around so I could kick at him. I slammed his head back against the desk. It made a horrible crunching sound. I kept kicking until his blood stained me to the knees.

Then I staggered to my feet, swaying on my trembling, bound legs. I pushed the phone off the receiver and forced my numb fingers to dial the police.

"Send a patrol to the Silver

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Star," I gasped. "I got Frankie Foster for you. The charges are murdering his wife, kidnaping me and bribing a congressman!" I had no proof on that last, but I figured what I had to say would give J. Edgar Hoover's G-men a lead and they could do the rest.

They did and some mighty big men went to jail.

As soon as I finished talking to the police, I dropped down beside Frankie's bloody body. Somehow I forced my almost dead fingers to dig the gun out of his pocket. I scrubbed it on the carpet to erase my fingerprints and got it back on him. His lawyer could explain to the jury why the murder weapon was found on his unconscious client. As it happened, the jury didn't swallow the story the defense cooked up. Frankie Foster handled himself well on the way to the gas chamber.

After I got the gun back on him, I dialed my secretary's apartment after several false tries. I was trying too hard.

I forced myself to move slower and made it.

"Lana, honey—" I began, a little groggily.

"Greg, darling!" she cried. "Don't say a thing! The police are here looking for you. They are listening on the extension phone. Run, baby, they're after you!"

"There's nothing to worry about," I said. "The case is wrapped up. I'm clean, sweetheart, but I need you. I'm at the Silver Star. Honey, I've been through hell and purgatory in the last three hours. Now I'm ready for a little bit of heaven. That's you! Can you come over here?"

"Yes!" she cried, in the tone of voice I love to hear my women use. "Yes, darling, I'm coming."

THE KUBLA KHAN CAPER

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

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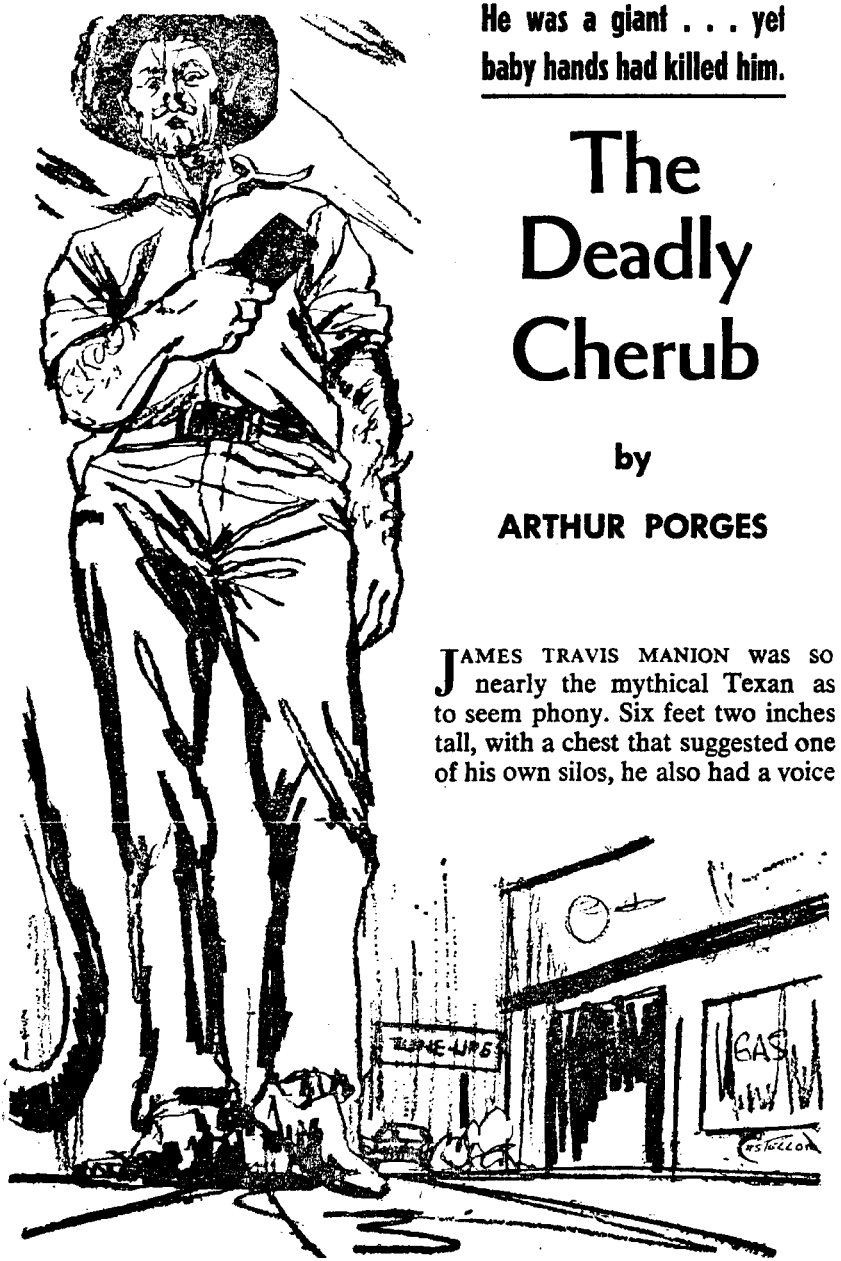
He was a giant . . . yet baby hands had killed him.

The Deadly Cherub

by

ARTHUR PORGES



JAMES TRAVIS MANION was so nearly the mythical Texan as to seem phony. Six feet two inches tall, with a chest that suggested one of his own silos, he also had a voice

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that seldom dropped below a sonorous bellow. He owned six thousand acres, more or less, of prime grazing land, and enough cattle to minimize his expense for lawnmowers. Manion had a couple of oil-wells, too; but they were piddling things that 'pooped out,' as he put it, a mere three hundred barrels a day.

"Just about enough for my l'il ol' cars!" he would boom, patting the glittering behemoth that seemed to extend a country mile.

But if he was loud, brash, ostentatiously ungrammatical in spite of an excellent education, and domineering, he was also generous, if erratic in giving, and wrote checks at the drop of a hat—a huge Stetson, naturally—checks that were delicately engraved with tiny figures of longhorn steers.

Gus Miller lived in an entirely different world. His messy gas station was one of the last to be found by a motorist heading into the Mohave Desert. Few people would care to live in so isolated a spot, and that circumstance gave Miller something of a monopoly, so that he didn't have to be a keen businessman to get by. He hated work even more than he liked money, and kept his needs to a minimum.

He was as tall as Manion, but skinny, except for a thickened middle from too much beer, and had large, knobby hands and feet. His eyes were coldly reptilian, except when he was listening to the races and had a bet down; then they glowed with an eager flame.

Usually it was wasted enthusiasm. As a handicapper, he would have bet on the hare against the tortoise, on Goliath against David, and on Harold the Saxon against William the Norman.

His life and Manion's were normally far apart, yet they did touch at one point in time and space. For the Texan, in his frequent business trips through the western states, had somehow got into the habit of stopping at Miller's station for gas before tackling the grim Mohave.

To most people, there was no reason for seeking Miller out. Quite the contrary, the average customer made a vow to find a more pleasant fellow to patronize. But Manion had a quirky nature, and found Gus an interesting puzzle.

Perhaps as a man fawned upon wherever he went, the big Texan was intrigued by Miller's sullen refusal to unbend. His surly, "How many today?" held no more amiability for Manion than for old Mrs. Tabor, even though her tiny foreign car took a few pints for each gallon gulped by the millionaire's Lincoln.

No matter how jovially the big man boomed, or how lavishly he tipped, Gus Miller never did more than grunt in an oafish way that suggested less gratitude than spiteful envy that a jerk with so much money should spend time on the road when he could be at the fifty

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dollar window at any of the big tracks.

"Why'n't you clean up this place?" Manion bellowed one morning, eyeing the station with less than his usual cheer. There was a fresh pile of junk to one side of the building; it seemed to consist mainly of blackened plumbing fixtures, scorched hardwood panels, broken statuary, and the ruins of a once-magnificent chandelier.

Miller having ignored that query, the Texan tried another.

"Where'd all that stuff come from, anyhow?" he rumbled. "Wasn't here last time. A fire sale? What you say, boy?"

"That crazy prospector's castle," he said laconically. Then, moved to talk by the prospect of a deal, added: "She burned down last week, so I figured nobody'd care about these things any more."

"That big old place all the tourists come to see? Well I be damned," Manion said. He gave Miller a shrewd glance. "Thought it was a kind of museum now, with a caretaker. How'd you get his loot past him, son?"

"He left to get help, I guess. It's a long hike to the highway. I happened to see the smoke—"

"I bet you did!"

"—and drove over in my towtruck."

"Mighty handy. Some of that stuff looks pretty heavy," the Texan said in a dry voice.

"Anything there you can use, I'll make you a good price," Miller said. "Valuable things, some of 'em. The old nut spent a fortune on that place, they say." He scowled. "Some people said there was gold plumbing—the liars! That chandelier, now, it could be fixed up real nice."

"Afraid I can't use any old rags or iron today," Manion said. "Fill her up, son, while I see a man about a dog."

He headed for the rest room, such as it was; and Miller, his face dark, jerked angrily at the nozzle. As he dabbed at the windshield with an oily rag that smeared the glass, he spotted a checkbook wedged far down behind the front seat. Apparently it had slipped from Manion's pocket, and he hadn't missed it. Without really knowing why, he acted on his magpie instinct, and took it.

Manion came out, signed the credit slip, and put his receipt in the glove compartment. When he opened it, Gus saw several other checkbooks. The guy must be loaded, he thought. Probably didn't even know how many books he had, or if one was gone.

The Texan drove off, bellowing: "See you next month, son!"

He'd left Gus the change from a twenty, but got only a sour nod. Miller was thinking of those hundred dollar tips the Texas was rumored to have given in town occasionally.

He examined the checkbook.

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There were six checks left, and the balance in this one bank made him whistle. Imagine the guy having $47,869.84 in just one account!

At this point, Gus had no definite criminal intent. That came later, after he had foolishly over-bet on a horse that needed all its strength just to stand up. Miller had been gathering all the credit

slips to send to the various oil companies so they could bill their clients. When he saw Manion's sprawling signature, he remembered that Mrs. Tabor had mentioned how freely the Texas signed and handed out checks all over town. He even used them for big tips when full of booze.

It occurred to Gus that imitating the writing wouldn't be too hard. With so many checks floating around, and so much money available, the guy might never even notice that one balance was off. Why should he figure it out, with millions to spend?

The first forgery was a small one—a mere $25 for a bet on Dick Swiveler, which Miller lost, as usual. After that, the descent to hell was just as easy as it is reputed to be. Before he knew it, Gus was into Manion for $3650. It began to worry him, but he still hoped that a man worth millions wouldn't fuss over a few thousands, and that if he did, there was no proof that Miller was the forger.

In both of these conclusions he was over optimistic, and forgot that a millionaire, aside from being very money conscious indeed to have made the grade in the first place, may hate to be suckered in the secong place, and has the means to show his resentment.

Inevitably, Manion showed up, his broad, tanned face no longer genial, but grim and menacing. He waved a sheaf of checks under Miller's long nose, and growled:

"If you needed money, son, being in a bind, you should've asked. But nobody plays me for a patsy. You've got one week to come up with three thousand six hundred and fifty dollars, or it's the pokey for you. And I may take a little interest outa your mangy hide!" he added, clenching enormous freckled fists.

Gus shrank under the threat. He was not a coward, but knew that the Texan could pull him apart like a ball of cotton. The guy was huge, husky, angry, and muscled like a gorilla.

You didn't mess with a man built like that; even his bull neck was a portent.

"I'll pay you back—every cent,"

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he quavered, all of his normal sulkiness replaced by fear.

"You'd better, boy. So far it's between us. But if I bring the cops in, that's your finish. One week," he repeated, turning back to his car.

But even before the Lincoln was out of sight, Gus knew that it was hopeless. He couldn't raise that much dough in a year. The station was only leased; no chance of borrowing on it; and all his stock wasn't worth more than a few hundred.

Three grand is a small price for a man's life, but many have gone for less. Miller was desperate. He had little imagination, but fear can be a powerful stimulant, and he was scared—scared of prison, scared of a bad beating, scared of losing the only way of life he knew. Most of all, scared of not being able to bet on or see a horse race for years. That would be intolerable.

It was easy to think of killing Manion. Miller would cheerfully have exterminated thousands to save himself from even minor harm, if there was no chance of getting caught.

For Manion, of course, he now felt personal hatred. The guy was filthy rich. Why did he have to make a federal case out of a few lousy checks? These millionaires had no sympathy for poorer people; they should all be killed, beginning with the big Texan.

Without Manion, there wouldn't be much of a case. Just make sure the guy brought the checks with him, and burn them. Even if the bank had photos, as many did, it wouldn't matter. With Manion gone, nobody would dig very deep, even if he confided in somebody in the family. With all that dough to inherit, they'd have no reason to chase up a few measly thousands.

All right; killing was fine, but not open murder—that wasn't like forgery. The family would be hot after the killer in that case, and he, Miller, would be their main suspect. Those checks must be known at least to the private detectives who fingered him for Manion. They would talk, once murder was involved. The only way out was to eliminate the Texan without incriminating himself to the slightest degree.

But how?

Miller wandered out of the shack, and began to circle the junk pile. For almost two hours he went around and around, stopping now and then to kick some object moodily, as if hoping for an oracle. But at dusk, Manion, figuratively speaking, still stood across his path, big, menacing, and quite completely invulnerable . . .

It was a long week, no doubt of that, but finally the Texan pulled up, driving a Jaguar this time. He didn't mention gas, having filled his tank earlier. No more business with this Miller crook.

He got out of the car, huge and hulking, his face dark. It seemed to Miller, watching him nervously,

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that Manion would rather beat him up than collect. Maybe he'd had a bad day—one netting less than a buck a minute, Gus thought bitterly.

"Got my money?" he boomed, scowling.

"I said I'd have it, didn't I?" Miller said in a sulky voice. "Bring the checks?"

The big man patted his jacket pocket.

"Right here. Oughta prosecute, really, but you ain't worth it, son. After I'd been so neighborly, too. Where I come from, ain't nothin' worse than disloyalty; but I guess you can't help what you are."

"C'mon in; I'll get the dough," Gus said. Neighborly, hell! All the guy'd done is buy some gas and lecture him on neatness. One of those hundred dollar tips would have been a lot more friendly.

Manion followed him into the messy station. He was still frowning, and looked disappointed. Gus opened a drawer, took out a bundle of bills fastened with a rubber band, and tossed it on the scarred desk.

A twenty was conspicuous on top of the package.

"Better count 'em," he said, suddenly insolent, now that the danger of a beating was past.

"You bet I will," Manion assured him grimly. "And if you're short a penny, son, you had better look out!"

He pulled off the rubber band, and with a large, horny thumb began to count.

AS THE youngest sheriff in the state, and new on the job, although properly seasoned as a deputy for five years, Danny Bowen had prayed for a good first case in his latest post. Something other than the sneaky butchering of a rancher's steers, or a case of shop lifting by some gal in the local department store.

But now that he was up against the murder of a millionaire Texan—a guy with a dozen highly vocal relations, who seemed to feel they owed their benefactor a quick execution of his killer—Danny began to regret his prayer. Maybe it was true that when the gods wanted to teach a young punk like him a lesson, all they had to do was grant his stupid wishes, the sheriff thought moodily.

Of course, in addition to his stint as deputy, he'd been through the best class on modern detection methods offered by the State University. He could type blood, take professional photos; match prints; do simple toxicology routines; use moulage; and interrogate most effectively. He was a fair practicing psychologist, who knew when to snarl and seem on the verge of reaching for a rubber hose; and when to offer the suspect a smoke and a sympathetic word.

None of these skills were doing the least bit of good. He had ex-

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cellent photos of the Jaguar in which Manion had been found; there were enough prints on the car to keep the F. B. I. busy a month. Some were of his chief—and only—suspect, but they had a right to be there, since he'd serviced the Jaguar often in the past, if not on the day of the killing. And there was the report of the medical examiner.

The medical evidence was simple, and had been checked by experts. Too simple, in fact. "Strangled from behind," the doctors agreed. By a woman, or even a young boy, they insisted, no matter how Danny urged them to look again.

Woman or small boy! Why, the tissues were crushed to hell, the hyoid bone, whatever that was, fractured, two vertebrae chipped.

"Whoever he or she is," one doctor had remarked grimly, "he, she, or it could break the neck of a pro wrestler with one squeeze, apparently. A person like that," he added in a cheerful voice, "should be a cinch to find, Sheriff."

Great! Bowen thought, recalling the comment. Only my one suspect is a lout of a gas station attendant. Manion's private eyes told me Miller had probably forged some of his checks, and Manion was out for blood.

That's a motive, all right; but I've seen Miller's hands. They're big, and he's no superman, anyhow. So he didn't do it, even if the car was abandoned suspiciously near his joint. He denies writing any bum checks. Maybe I can nail him there, but that's a side issue. Let the bank worry about that. Just let me find the joker with the bitsy fingers and giant muscles—some kind of super-dwarf. Boy, am I reaching!

Everything that he had learned to do, Bowen did conscientiously. He had inquiries made about possible hitch-hikers on the road that morning, but there were none, the weather being bad. Miller admitted being the last known person to have seen Manion alive.

"I saw him drive off," Gus had said in his sullen way, eyes like crumbs of glass. "He was okay when he left here."

"Let's see his credit slip," Danny had demanded, watching the reptilian gaze flicker.

"Credit slip?" Miller had mumbled.

"Isn't that how he did business?"

"Not this time," Gus declared, recovering his poise. "He paid cash."

"Odd," Bowen had said mildly. "He'd just bought a full tank from Jim Harris ten miles back. Why are you lying, Miller?"

"All right," Gus had said. "This time he wasn't here to get gas. He just stopped to tell me he wouldn't be back. Said the place was too dirty. Wanted me to get rid of that pile of junk."

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He gestured towards the untidy heap. "These rich creeps!" he added. "Think they can order the whole world around. Because I run my own place to suit me, he takes away his trade. Well, let him! I told him what he could do with his business. But I didn't kill him."

A sly grin touched his lips. "Hell, if I killed everybody who said this dump was a mess, I'd need a cemetery of my own!"

It sounded convincing, Danny had to admit. "I can believe that," he'd said drily; but the belief didn't solve anything. Miller was obviously pretty tough inside, and didn't panic easily; that was clear. Besides, all this was pointless, really. His immediate job was to find Small Hands, the musclebound elf, the freak with iron fingers on a child-sized body. It would be rough if the murderer turned out to be a girl—what she'd look like is anybody's guess; maybe like a hairless orang—or an improbable boy of fourteen. Yet neither possibility could be ruled out, weird as it might seem.

But after four weeks, Sheriff Bowen was catching it from all sides: the heirs, the papers, and the squirming D. A., who passed along two kicks for every one from the governor. The county had been combed for people with small hands and big biceps; there were plenty of each, but few in combinations, and they innocent as mewling babes.

In his despair, Danny Bowen suddenly remembered that Lloyd Pearson, a classmate at college, had often claimed that a person's character could be determined from his hands. He was a skilled artist, who knew more about anatomy than most medical students. Maybe he could suggest an angle about the killer, Danny thought. There was no harm in trying, anyhow. He phoned Pearson and drove forty miles to his house, bringing all his data along, just in case.

When he gave Lloyd a brief summary of the problem, the artist, a small, rosy fellow, with enough hair for all four Beatles, shook his head ruefully.

"Dan, I said I could tell character from hands, and I can, but you didn't bring any. All you have are some marks on a dead man's neck—not even that; just photos of said marks. I'm not modest, but I know my limitations."

"I knew it was a longshot," Bowen groaned. "But I'm desperate. The D. A.'s ready to leave me for dead—if the papers and Manion's family don't get me first!" He fished some pictures out of his briefcase. "Just take a look at the finger marks, for what it's worth."

Pearson shrugged.

"I'm not exactly a Dr. Thorndyke," he said, taking the big glossies. "Although," he added, "I still prefer Freeman to the Gunsel-and-Gonad School that—say, even

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the palm marks are clear! Amazing!"

"Infra-red," Danny said. "It gets through the skin."

For a moment Pearson showed no reaction to the photos; then the sheriff saw his eyes widen. The artist whistled softly, and rummaged in his desk.

"You said 'small hands,'" he murmured. "That isn't the half of it, old boy." He found a pair of proportional dividers, applied them to one of the pictures, and jotted down some numbers. After studying them in silence for almost a minute, he said, "I don't believe it."

Danny, his chin higher than Pearson's head, had watched in eager expectation.

"Don't believe what?" he demanded. "Let's have it."

"The human hand," Lloyd said, a bit pompously, "changes its proportions with age, just as the head does in relation to the body. You know, for example, how much bigger than its torso a baby's head seems."

"So?" Bowen was bewildered.

"I hardly dare say it, but facts must be faced. I'll stake my life on this. These are not just small hands—so help me God, they're the hands of an infant, a baby!"

"Baby hands?"

"That's what I said," was the cool reply. "I've checked the proportions carefully, as you saw. My specialty, remember."

"But, damn it, they crushed a strong man's neck—a mighty thick neck at that. This Manion guy was built like a bull. No baby could do such a thing. You're off base somewhere."

"Baby hands," Pearson repeated softly. "The hands of a cherub, so to speak." He peered at the photos again. "Now that I think of it—I'm no doctor, mind you—it is odd the way there's no slipping, no blurring of the joint marks to show natural flexure of the fingers. Who chokes without tightening his grip?"

"Wait a minute!" Bowen cried. "You're saying they're stiff—solid, maybe. Why, if that's so—"

"Righto, come out with it; I'm thinking the same thing. Wood, metal, stone, even, but not living flesh."

"So that's how he did it," Danny said. "Given the hands, it wouldn't be too tough to whip up a gadget. Let's see, what would he use?" He snapped his fingers. "Of course; a jack. A hydraulic jack would be perfect. Or the screw kind, even. Just fasten one hand to the moving part, and the other set in opposition, both good and tight. There was a mark on Manion's neck. He was knocked out, I'll bet anything, and then put in that—that strangulation machine of Miller's."

"Not so fast," Pearson objected. "Where would he get such hands? They're not easy to find."

"I don't know, but—yes, I do! That castle, the one that burned.

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Didn't they have a collection there? Seems to me I read about one."

"They sure did," Pearson said. "Mostly junk, but a few good things. Say, I have their catalog around here someplace. Let me get it."

He left the room, to return shortly with a pamphlet. He riffled the pages, while Danny waited hopefully.

"Well, whaddya know," Lloyd murmured. "Here's a picture of a Donatello Cherub—copy, of course, but in bronze. It's holding a bowl. Without it, the hands would be just right for our marks."

"Good!" Danny said. "We can nail him. Even if he melted the statue down with his torch, we'll find some tie-in, now that I know what to look for. Melted bronze on the floor; maybe hacksaw filings—he had to cut off the hands and the bowl, too. Besides, he must've welded the hands to a jack, and I can't see him throwing out a good jack. There'll be traces. Always are."

"I know," Pearson grinned. "I learned that much from Dr. Thorndyke."

"Traces will be enough," Danny said grimly. "Enough to hang a murderer. Let's go."

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A SMALL SIN

"Gold is where you find it—except when a fool dares play with the devil's dice."

by HAL ELLSON

OFFICIALLY, NO gambling was permitted in the city of Montes, but—well, even the police looked the other way, shrugged and saw nothing. After all, a man had a right to dispense with his money as he saw fit.

So there were places where a man could go for an evening. Some were of dubious reputation, but the Widow's? Respectable was the word for it. Senora saw to that, her word the law, her rules simple and strict. No women, no swearing, proper dress.

A serious clientle attended the nightly sessions: business men, professionals, politicians, a close select circle, with an occasional outsider.

Then the stranger appeared.

A man of thirty, he was—thin, pale, ascetic-looking and completely inoffensive. Arriving, no one paid attention to him; leaving, he went out the door with most of the dice-players' money in his pocket.

A stroke of luck. Back he came on the following night. Inoffensive? He appeared almost humble and had nothing to say of himself, though he admitted to the name Serrano. Again, his luck was fantastic.

On the third night the same; he picked the others clean and left. By the end of the week rumors and tales were spreading. The ugliest hinted at cheating, but this came from a bad loser.

Skill with the dice he had in plenty, but more than this set the talk in motion. Senor Serrano was

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a man of mystery, as much a stranger as when he had first appeared. Where did he hail from? No one knew or could guess. To add to the mystery he arrived on foot at the Widow's and left in the same manner, vanishing into the night.

Anonymity irritates, and winners gather envy. Tales spread; angry losers wove fanciful stories and outrageous lies, while a saying went among the better-tempered gamblers—"Roll the dice with the devil, and you lose your pants to Senor Serrano."

Now, in a bar called the Black Cat, Senor Serrano's name was as familiar as tequila if only because he was rapidly impoverishing its clientel. The Black Cat happened to be the favorite haunt of Victor Fiala, who sometimes gambled and most times did not and who was wise enough to avoid Senor Serrano.

"If he's that good with the dice, then he's much too good for me," he replied to a friend when challenged to an evening at the Widow's. The friend persisted, but Fiala remained firm; he wanted no part of the devil.

No part? Not five minutes after his refusal, the phone rang at the end of the bar. Pancho, the proprietor of the Black Cat, answered it and turned. "Victor."

Fiala frowned. "Trouble, Pancho?"

"It's Lopez."

Another name for trouble. Fiala shrugged and went to the phone. Ten minutes later he was at police headquarters facing the chief.

"Have a seat," said Lopez. Then: "I know you're off duty, Victor, but I'd like a favor."

Fiala said nothing.

"You heard of Senor Serrano?"

"Who in Montes hasn't?"

"Have you rolled the dice against him?"

"I'm not a fool."

Lopez looked embarrassed.

"I was," he said, "unfortunately. The other night I went out to the Widow's."

"And lost your shirt?"

Lopez nodded, and Fiala smiled. "You're in good company. Everyone loses to Serrano. Do you think he cheats?"

"No. I watched him closely. So did the others. He couldn't have got away with anything. But that's beside the point."

"Which is?"

"Investigate him. I want to know his real name and where he hails from."

"Is this an official assignment?"

Lopez shook his head. "Strictly personal. I'm curious."

"You think something is off-key?"

"I do, but I don't know what." Lopez shrugged. "Wait till you see him. He isn't a gambler, but the way he plays, like the devil's behind him. Another thing, he

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seemed familiar, but I couldn't place him."

"It's hard to place the devil, or beat him."

Lopez smiled wryly, reached into his pocket and drew out a wad of pesos. He pushed it across his desk and said, "You'll need this to pay the devil."

Montes is heavily populated, a growing city. Mountains ring it in; the valleys between are verdant, rife with corn, oranges. These same rich valleys open into desert country; suddenly there is a dearth of green, houses and people vanish in the thin dry air.

On the south road out of Montes, where the desert begins, the Widow's place is situated, an old ranchhouse with stuccoed walls that blaze white in the sun and gleam from afar in the moonlight.

It was ten-thirty when Fiala arrived there. A dark night. His headlights picked out the few scrawny trees growing about the place, the pale walls. He braked his car, got out, noted the other cars—at least a dozen—and thought, Senor Serrano is growing rich. Entering the ranchhouse, he was struck by the scene—a dice game in progress, the players gathered around a huge table, most of them known to him.

How different they were from their ordinary selves, grim and silent, watching the one with the dice—Senor Serrano, whose face was a gaunt white mask.

So this is the devil, thought Fiala, studying him and frowning. Sometimes names eluded him, but never a face. This man he knew him from somewhere and couldn't place him. Senor Serrano sent the white cubes rolling from a leather cup. Across the table they tumbled, came to rest and a groan escaped the others. Serrano had made his point.

With both hands he swept up his winnings, picked up the dice again and rattled them, all this with no display of emotion, but with a look in his eye such as fanatics possess, as if he were willing himself to win. And obviously he was.

A man at the table moved aside, nodded and Fiala stepped into the place made for him. Senor Serrano glanced at him and away; the dice tumbled from the cup. Seven! Another groan escaped the others while Senor Serrano calmly reached forward to sweep up his winnings.

The game ended at three in the morning. To a man, Senor Serrano had stripped the others to the bone. Slowly they went to the door, then out to their cars and drove off into the night.

Last to leave, except for Serrano, Fiala slipped into his car. A short way from the ranchhouse, he stopped, stepped to the road and looked back. The building appeared as a shadow. Soon Senor Serrano appeared. No car to carry

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him from this isolated spot. It didn't make sense. Could he live in a hole in the desert?

The dark figure against the ranchhouse was moving now. Fiala watched till Senor Serrano reached the road, then started after him on foot. Ahead lay the desert, with the nearest village seven miles away. Was this where Senor Serrano lived? Fiala quailed at the prospect of trailing him there on foot.

On the road ahead Senor Serrano's figure was plainly legible. A hundred yards divided the two men from each other. A long walk in the desert. And for what? Serrano had committed no crime, and where he lived was his own business.

A quarter of a mile and the road sloped downward toward a shallow stream that had gouged its way through the desert floor and now lay deep between steep banks of yellow clay. Where the road met the stream, one crossed over on a series of rocks. Serrano did not cross the stream, but suddenly vanished.

Stunned, Fiala paused; then ran to the stream, stopped and looked around. There was no sign of Serrano; not a sound disturbed the silence of the night. Puzzled, he crossed the sluggish flow; the desert road was desolate.

He shook his head, retraced his steps, sat down beside the stream and cursed himself. The whole evening wasted. Worse, he would have to explain to Lopez—but what was there to explain?

A splashing alerted him. He turned and saw a burro treading the stream; a man wearing a sombrero sat astride the animal. Animal and man came on. Fiala stood up as they reached him. "Senor."

The rider halted his mount, touched the brim of his sombrero. "Can I be of service?"

"Yes. Have you seen a man on foot? I—"

"This is a lonely place, Senor. I saw no one," the man replied. Prodding his burro, he moved on.

Disgusted, Fiala returned to his car and drove off. Montes was quiet when he reached it, a sleeping city. The Blue Moon, an all-night restaurant facing headquarters, was empty and echoed his steps as he entered it.

He ordered coffee and drank it slowly while he tried to solve the mystery of Senor Serrano's disappearance. How had he vanished so fast and completely? It didn't make sense. Over a second cup of coffee once more he tried to crack the riddle, failed and stood up.

Five minutes later he lay in bed, weary but unable to sleep, for he kept thinking of Serrano's disappearance and kept seeing the man on the burro splashing through the stream.

The next morning, Lopez sat back in his chair with a sour look on his face. "You lost Senor Serrano?"

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Fiala shrugged. "That's what happened."

"Senor Serrano must have a fast car."

"No." Fiala shook his head. "He has no car. He left the Widow's place on foot, taking the road toward Rosario. I trailed him to the stream and, *Fftt!* He vanished."

"He dug a hole in the ground?"

Fiala reddened. "If he did, I'll be there tonight to hand him the shovel."

"Good." Lopez smiled and lit a cigarette; his eyes followed Fiala to the door. When it opened, he said, "Just in case Senor Serrano vanishes again, you'd better hold on to that shovel."

The door closed abruptly. Fiala descended the balcony stairs to the shaded courtyard, then walked out into the sun-swept plaza. A long hot day lay ahead, but was it long enough to prepare a plan to trap Senor Serrano?

Slowly Fiala crossed the plaza. On the opposite side laughter rang from a cantina, someone was plucking a guitar, an under-current of sad notes and a soft voice trembled in a fading lament. Fiala paused before the cantina, then went through the door.

"Madero." The barman filled his glass, slowly he drank the brandy, three glasses in all and left for home. His special chair stood in the patio, in the shade of the avacado. He lit a cigarette, relaxed, closed his eyes. The heat of the day and the brandy was doing its work, numbing his brain.

A plan for Senor Serrano? He couldn't think, sleep was taking him into its own dark night. He struggled against it, heard a faint splashing and out of the blackness came a man on a burro. The man touched the brim of his sombrero—and suddenly vanished.

Four A.M. Fiala looked at his watch and shook his head. Where was Senor Serrano? he wondered, looking across the stream toward the Widow's place. The road was empty, ghostly in the moonlight, then, as if out of the dust itself, a figure appeared. Serrano?

Fiala leaned forward. The walker came on, paused at the stream's edge and from across the shallow flow Fiala recognized Serrano. Now, he thought, Serrano glanced back over his shoulder, turned quickly and hurried off, following the stream, which began to narrow as it flowed between steep banks of hardened clay. In the moonlight his figure stood out. He was still moving forward. To where? Fiala wondered, and suddenly his quarry vanished.

Squinting, Fiala made out a dark patch against the clay bank. A cave? Possibly. He waited, frowning. What if Serrano didn't re-appear? He gambled, sat still and suddenly, just as he had "seen" them that afternoon while dozing off, a burro and man appeared.

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On they came toward the crossing. A command and the burro turned into the tired current. Splashes broke the silence. Nimbly the burro picked his way across the stony bed and gained the road that led through the desert to Rosario.

Fiala picked himself up. The mounted one halted and touched his sombero. "Senor."

"The name is Fiala. And how much did you win tonight, Senor Serrano?"

"What do you want?"

"I don't want the money you won, so have no fear of that."

"Then?"

Fiala hestiated. "It's not my doing and none of my business—" He paused, shrugged, went on: "You must know that you've caused talk in Montes. No one knows who you are, nor where you come from."

"True, but—"

"As I said, it's none of my business."

"Then please allow me to pass."

Fiala shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I have orders from the chief of police of Montes—"

"To arrest me for gambling, when he himself indulges?"

Fiala laughed. "And loses his money to you."

"When one gambles, one should expect to lose."

"That hardly applies to one like yourself who always wins. Can you explain such luck?"

"I'm sorry. Now if you will kindly allow me to go on my way."

"Only when you tell who you are and where you come from. Otherwise—" Here Fiala lied in his teeth— "I shall be forced to arrest you."

Silence. Then Serrano whispered, "I am embarrassed. I can't."

"You must."

Silence again. Finally a shrug, then off came the sombrero and the one who called himself Serrano said, "I am from Rosario, the priest of the village."

It was Fiala's turn to be embarrassed. Padre Gonzalez. He recognized him and shook his head. A priest who gambled?

"I know," said Padre Gonzalez. "Allow me to explain. My church is coming apart. The stucco falls off the walls, the bell-rope is rotted, the bell cracked. You see, the money was not for myself. Ah, I know what you're thinking—a priest who gambles. Well, if I have sinned—"

"If you have," Fiala interrupted, "It is only a small sin, but that's not what puzzles me."

"And what does, Senor?"

"How you managed to win so consistently."

Padre Gonzalez shrugged. "The truth is, I don't know myself." Smiling, then, he leaned forward and whispered, "Perhaps God was on my side, and now I must go. It's a long way to Rosario and the burro is tired."

Up from the stream-bank burro and rider moved while Fiala stood watching, smile on his face.

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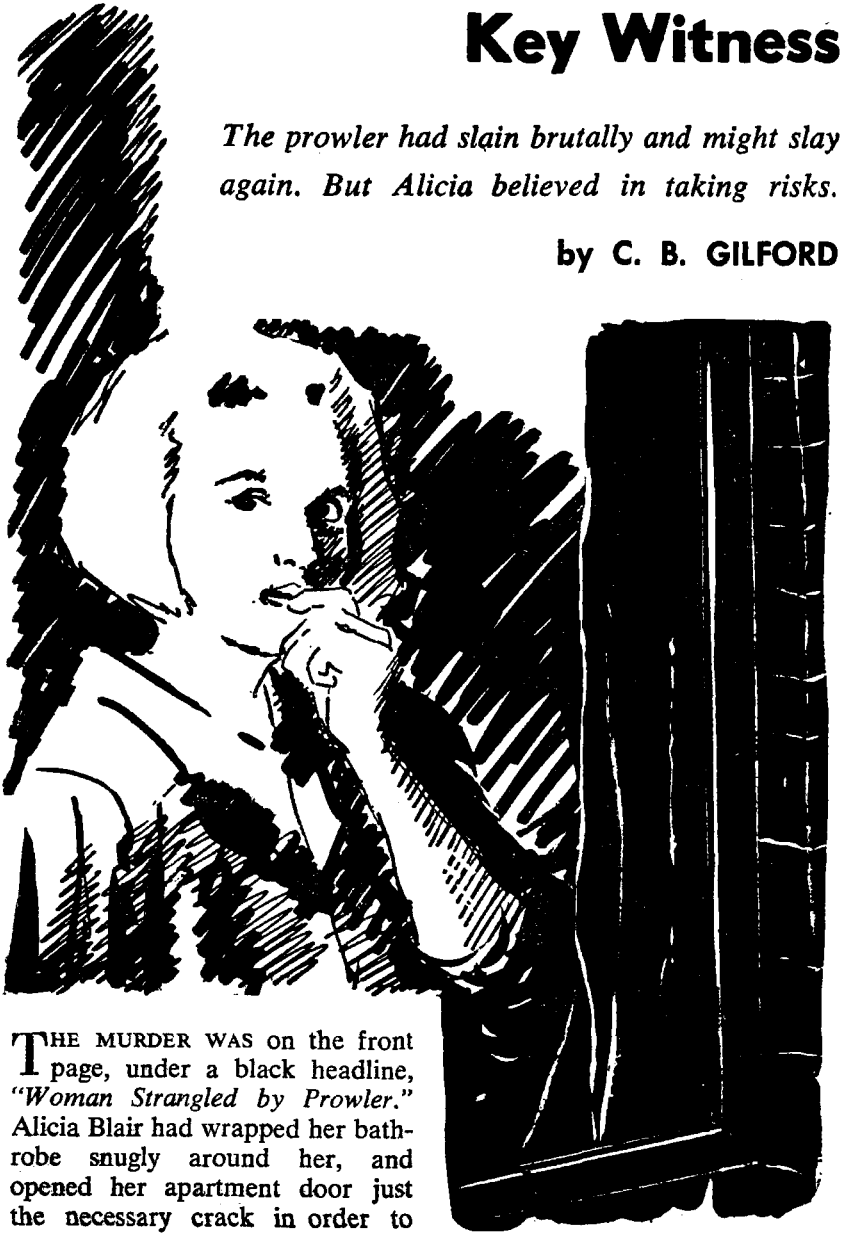
Key Witness

The prowler had slain brutally and might slay again. But Alicia believed in taking risks.

by C. B. GILFORD



THE MURDER WAS on the front page, under a black headline, *"Woman Strangled by Prowler."* Alicia Blair had wrapped her bathrobe snugly around her, and opened her apartment door just the necessary crack in order to

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bring in the paper and the single bottle of milk. She had carried both to her tiny kitchen, and there had unfolded the paper. Her main interest had been the weather, which was threatening, and the question was whether to wear raincoat and galoshes. But then she saw the headline.

A wave of dizziness and nausea swept over her. She had to clutch at the edge of the table and sit down abruptly. It was a long moment before she could evern glance at the paper again. She wanted desperately to read the story under the headline, and at the same time was terrified at what she might find there.

Would it be anything like that awful night she had known? Would it even be the same—or almost the same—except for. . . ? No, she mustn't think of that. She had resolutely put that night out of her mind. But she hadn't succeeded, had she? It was still there, just waiting to be remembered, as if it had been only last night—so real, so immediate that even now the scream was in her throat, and she had to clap a hand over her mouth to silence it.

The moment passed, the dreadful moment of panic, though her breast still heaved and her whole body trembled. She stayed in the kitchen chair, closed her eyes, and waited for the return of sanity.

Finally she had the courage to look at it again. "*Woman Strangled by Prowler.*" And then slowly, painfully, to read the accompanying story.

Ruth Felton had been a spinster, forty-six years old, living alone in a tiny second-floor apartment on Grove Avenue. There had been a chain on the door, so that the police had been compelled to batter their way inside. The intruder, however, had been more subtle. He had entered through an unlocked window, having cut the screen.

It had been so easy. He'd found a ladder in the row of garages. It had been the ladder, standing there against the wall of the building under the window, which had given the clue to trouble in the Felton apartment. A neighbor had seen a man climbing down, had shouted in alarm, and the man had fled.

Inside the apartment the police had found a shambles. There had been a struggle. People below had heard the noise, but had simply assumed that Miss Felton was moving furniture. They had also heard what they later decided must have been a strangled scream or groan, but had perversely interpreted the sound to be merely a muffled expletive uttered by Miss Felton as she dropped the heavy furniture.

But Miss Felton had been fighting for her life. And she had lost. She was found lying on the floor, her clothes torn, and with a nylon stocking pulled tight around her

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neck. There was no clear fingerprints.

Why had the murderer chosen Ruth Felton's window to enter? No one, of course, knew for sure. The light had been on, indicating she was home. And he'd known, probably from previous observation, that she lived alone.

There was a picture of Miss Felton. She'd been a plain, almost homely woman. Who would be interested in her and want to kill her —except a maniac?

Compulsively Alicia Blair put both her hands to her face, and slowly, with her fingertips, explored there. Those delicate nerve ends could appraise without the aid of a mirror. The skin was rough, parched, old, dusty, like a neglected piece of land. Around the mouth and the eyes the lines were deepening. The hair was wispy, lifeless.

The whole sad story was in the touch. Alicia Blair was an unattractive woman. Not ugly, just without sparkle—dim, dingy. Who would be interested in Alicia Blair, except. . . ?

A chill ran through her, not a creeping chill, but a jolting thing, like the stab of an icicle. A chill of both terror and desolation.

She struggled to her feet. She had to, to keep from fainting. She had to move, to make the blood flow in her veins. She had to walk. In the small apartment there wasn't far to go. She went from the kitchen, through the living room, and into the bedroom. And there she was halted by the explosion of the memory, vivid, complete, the experience re-lived.

It had happened here—in the bedroom.

THREE MONTHS ago—early summer. Just after ten o'clock on a Thursday evening. Time to retire, for there would be a lot of work waiting for her at the office tomorrow.

It had been mildly warm through the day—not hot, just pleasant. There was no air conditioning in the apartment, and the rooms hadn't quite cooled off yet. But there was a nice breeze outside, so she had opened all the windows. The lacy little curtains fluttered as the air disturbed them.

She was doing something she seldom did, walking around the apartment in just a slip. Not that there was anyone to see her—there were no neighbors with windows at the same height who could peek in. So she felt secure, but strangely wanton too. The sensual awareness of her own body exhilarated her a little. She padded barefoot on the rug, savoring the freedom, and the small impropriety of it.

She switched off the light in her little kitchen, then in the living room. The only light left burning then in the whole apartment was the small lamp on her dressing ta-

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ble. Guided by that, she went into the bedroom.

That was probably why she didn't see the man till she was all the way into the room, and had reached the foot of her bed. He had stepped silently out of the shadows, and was standing there directly in front of her.

What had stopped her from screaming instantly? She didn't know then, and she was still vague about it in her mind. The man could have tried to stop her, but she should have been able to manage some noise at least, some attempt to call for help. Perhaps she was merely too surprised. But that didn't explain why the instinct for self-preservation hadn't functioned automatically.

She had seen the man quite clearly, even though he was between her and the lamp and his face was not directly illiminated. Or she had an impression of him anyway that was very distinct and precise.

He was not tall, only two inches taller than herself. He was not very broad either. Yet she knew—she knew absolutely—that he was strong. He radiated power and energy. And something else. Even now, three months later, she either could not or she was afraid to define what that something was. Maleness?

Yes, perhaps. Not masculinity. That was a quality which Alicia Blair had observed and admired often from afar. But this was a different kind of presence. It was a heavy, pungent odor in the air, a hot, stale breath reeking of tobacco, the oppressive feeling of being surrounded by an electric charge about to explode.

Both of them stood quite still. With the man's face in shadow, she saw mostly just the dim glow of his eyes. Blue eyes. Yes, she was positive they were blue. They stared at her fixedly, unmoving, unblinking.

What do you want? She didn't ask the question. She merely wanted to ask it. What did he want? What was he? He was not a sneak-thief . . . lights were on . . . he'd known there was somebody in the apartment. So he couldn't just be after her purse. *What then?*

It was he who spoke. "Don't make any noise." A husky whisper, seemingly controlled, but with an immense urgency hinted in the stuttering breathlessness. "Don't make any noise—or I'll get rough."

A strange way of saying it, wasn't it? Would he be gentle if she was quiet? Gentle in doing what? Killing her? How could he?

But she was quiet. Because of the strangeness of the request? She never knew. Perhaps it was because she was more afraid to scream than not to. Or perhaps she couldn't scream.

He put out his hand—his right hand. She sensed rather than saw it come toward her in the dark. His finger tips brushed her cheek,

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skimmed it, progressed to her ear lobe, feather-light, then down the left side of her neck to the little hollow in the shoulder there, then forward again, to where the big vein pulsed timidly in her throat. It was all a single, gentle, gliding movement. Gentle!

The finger tips didn't stop. They explored restlessly. Delicately, like the probings of a doctor or a surgeon. Strong hands. Emanations of his strength flowed from his fingers, through her skin, into her flesh. But not life-giving—menacing rather.

Her lips moved, soundlessly.

"No noise," he whispered again.

She shook her head, a tiny sign of acquiescence.

She had no choice. With one hand, she knew, with that one hand that was still touching her neck, he could squeeze the breath out of her. One hand—if he wanted to. Why was he waiting? He came half a step closer, and his hand went around to the back of her neck.

Then a knock came at her door, at the front door, the entrance door to her apartment. A loud, insistent knock.

"Who's that?" A hoarse whisper. And the hand at her neck was trembling.

She shook her head. She didn't know. Did he believe her?

The knocking came again. The man turned, ran lightly, silently to the window. She saw then that the screen had been lifted out, and was leaning against the wall just inside. The man poised on the sill, then seemed simply to disappear.

She hurried to the window and looked out. And she saw both him and how he had gotten to her window. The big oak tree, and the sturdy, almost horizontal branch that came so close to the building, and that gave her such lovely shade in the summer! The man was just climbing down the trunk of the tree, dropping to the ground. Abruptly he vanished, merging like a shadow into the other shadows.

The knock once again. She started to answer it, realized she was in her slip, and hastily donned her robe. She had to answer the

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knock, she decided, or whoever it was would try to break the door down.

When she got there, undid the chain, and opened the door, Mr. Linsdale, the building manager, was standing in the hall. He was in his shirtsleeves, his hair tousled, and he looked worried.

"Miss Blair, are you all right? My wife thought she saw someone in the tree, and then we thought how close that branch comes to your window, and we thought I should check. Are you all right?"

She hesitated, clutching her robe tightly about her throat. Finally she said, "Thank you, Mr. Linsdale. It was kind of you, but I'm quite all right."

SHE HAD LIED to Mr. Linsdale. She'd told him nothing, and she hadn't called the police. The screen, she'd discovered, had been cut just enough to allow a hand to slip inside and undo the hook. Then the screen had been lifted out and dropped inside. She had marvelled, shuddered, at the agility of the man who had accomplished all this from a tree branch, which seemed to her so fragile and far away.

But instead of revealing the fact she'd had an intruder, she'd carefully mended the screen with a piece of wire and replaced it in the window. And she'd sat awake all night, alternately trembling with remembered fear and trying to analyze why she hadn't told Mr. Linsdale or notified the police.

There had been a man in her bedroom. She had seen him, and he had seen her, in only her slip. He had touched her intimately, her bare shoulder, her neck. And she just—well, she just couldn't tell anybody about that.

He hadn't harmed her. Perhaps he had never meant to harm her. "I'll get rough," he'd threatened. But he hadn't. Not even when there was knocking at the door.

So if she hadn't been hurt in any way, what was the use of enduring all the questions that the police would surely ask? And all the questions the other tenants would ask? And the way they would stare at her as she passed, and then talk behind her back?

It had seemed so all right then, to keep silent. So much indeed, the preferable thing to do. Perhaps the police could find the man, and he'd be accused of breaking into her apartment—burglary. What else? He hadn't hurt her. And even as a burglar, he hadn't stolen any thing.

But there'd be a trial, and she would have to testify, to point an accusing finger at him, to describe, in front of the whole world, exactly what had happened. Oh no!

Alicia Blair sat down, trembling uncontrollably. Everything was different now. The man was no longer merely her burglar. Yes . . . yes . . . yes, it was the

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same man. There was no doubt of that in Alicia's mind. The same man. Except that now he was a murderer.

She would go to the police. She might seem silly. But she hadn't committed a crime. And they might not scold her very much at all after she gave them the complete, detailed description—when she identified the man in their files. If he wasn't in the files, she could draw them a picture. She had a perfect memory of that face!

After a long time she got up from the bed, still shaking, but she managed to dress. Still it was a quarter past eight before she left the apartment, much later than her usual time.

"Oversleep this morning, Miss Blair?" It was Mr. Linsdale, noticing her from his doorway.

"Yes, I overslept." She passed him quickly, wondering if he saw how pale she was, how nervous. He had always been a little suspicious of her—she was sure of it—ever since that night.

She took a bus downtown. But she got off at a different stop, and walked two blocks to police headquarters. She knew where the building was, because she had considered coming here before. Knees weak but fists clenched, she ascended the broad steps, went through a big door, and entered into a vast foyer. A young, uniformed policeman sat at a desk, and she approached him.

"Yes, ma'am?"

She stood before him, dumb, paralyzed. She hadn't rehearsed what she would say. Now how should she say it? Her confusion started her trembling again.

"Can I help you?" Rather than sympathetic, the young cop looked bored.

She licked her dry lips. *I have some information. I know who murdered Ruth Felton. You see, three months ago I found a man in my bedroom.* How could she tell this young man anything?

"Lady, I'll bet I know what's on your mind. There have been a dozen women in here this morning already. On account of the Felton murder last night. Every one of them saw something, or heard something, or demanded police protection. Which is it with you, lady?"

She fled. She couldn't stand that young smart aleck looking at her, disbelieving her before she had uttered one word. She rushed out of the building, and started walking. Half an hour later she called into the office and told her boss she was ill. She spent the rest of the day at the movies.

At five-thirty, her usual time—she didn't want to make Mr. Linsdale any more suspicious—she arrived home. Reluctantly she glanced at the evening paper. There was more about the Ruth Felton murder.

The police had filled in a bit

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more on the sketchy picture of the crime. Although Ruth Felton's apartment had been rather damaged from the struggle between Miss Felton and her assailant, it had not been ransacked. Burglary had seemingly not been the motive for the man's entering. Apparently nothing had been taken. It was the man's advances, then, which Miss Felton had resisted.

Alicia Blair sat and stared at the printed word. Resisted. What had she resisted? Fingers, gentle fingers yet very male, which had glided down the side of her neck to the little hollow in her shoulder, around to the back of her neck? A wave of tingling memory swept over Alicia.

A clue, a very slight clue, had been left by the killer. Threads, apparently from his shirt, had been caught in Ruth Felton's fingernails. They were blue, a very bright sky blue.

Yes, Alicia remembered that now too! His eyes had been that kind of blue. And his shirt had exactly matched his eyes.

Absolutely, it was her man.

THERE WAS another murder six weeks later. Inez Maroces, forty, single, employed in a garment factory, living alone in a tiny apartment. An easy apartment to enter, on the ground floor. Glass was broken to unlock a window. On this occasion there was a scream but the killer succeeded in strangling Inez Maroces before anybody came. Police surmised, judging from the marks on the woman's throat, that possibly the man had used only one hand—his right hand. His strength, they concluded, was considerable.

Several people, aroused by Miss Maroces' scream, had arrived on the scene tardily, but still in time to catch a glimpse of the murderer. They all described him as a man of solid build but only medium height, not large. And although the evening had been chilly, he wore no jacket or coat, only a shirt. A kind of blue.

There seemed to be not the slightest doubt that Miss Maroces' killer was the same man who had strangled Ruth Felton with a nylon stocking. His pattern was not quite the same, but this time his victim had managed a clear scream. Again there were no usable prints, and again there had been no attempt at burglary. The man was a maniac.

Maniac! This was a weekend, and Alicia Blair for the whole two days did little but lie on her bed and stare at the ceiling. That, and listen to radio news and read the papers. Maniac was the word they all used. Two murders only six weeks apart, and obviously the work of the same man. A maniac who preyed on solitary, helpless women.

All sorts of tips were coming in, the news said. Frightened women

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panicked every time they saw a man in a blue shirt. But police needed more than a description of clothing or build, both too general. The trouble was, nobody had ever seen the man's face. They had sifted through some known criminals as possible suspects, grilled them routinely, but without results. There were no solid leads.

Alicia lay there on the bed and stared holes into the ceiling, her thoughts confused, chaotic. Ruth Felton had struggled, and Inez Maroces had screamed. Most certainly he had told them he would be "rough" if he had to. And now they called him a maniac. But he wasn't really rough. He was gentle. She knew that . . . she knew.

IT WAS AFTER the third murder that Alicia Blair became impatient and decided to act. This time when she arrived at the big police headquarters building, she had no difficulty in dealing with the young man at the first desk. She had steeled herself for the ordeal, knowing that it would be unpleasant but necessary.

What with a third murder having occurred, headquarters was full of activity, but she managed to get the ear of a sergeant. Then, when she told a bit of her story, the sergeant brought two lieutenants with him.

She told them almost everything—the man standing there in her half-dark bedroom, the interruption of the knock at the door, and his escape.

One of the lieutenants was the angry, accusing type. "Why didn't you let us know about this right away? Three women have been killed!"

But the other lieutenant was sympathetic and practical. "Calm down and be reasonable, Jack," he warned. "We need Miss Blair's cooperation. Now, Miss Blair, what we need is an accurate description of this man."

"He had blue eyes," she responded instantly.

"What else?"

"They were very bright blue."

"Uh huh. What about his build?"

"About two inches taller than me. Not bulky, but solid."

She spent hours then poring over pictures in the police files. None of them, she could say honestly, was of the man they were looking for.

"But you could identify the man if you saw him?" the reasonable lieutenant persisted.

"Absolutely," she told him.

A police captain, also in plain clothes, joined them. There were conferences, in and out of Alicia's hearing.

"Miss Blair, they said finally, "for this information to be of any use to us, we'll have to let it out to the papers. To alert the public to look for a man of this description. Without your name or ad-

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dress, of course. But the killer will know where we got the information, and he'll also know that if we can find him that you'll identify him. This puts you in a position of danger."

"Oh, I realize this," she answered readily. "But I feel I have to do whatever I can to help stop these awful murders."

"We appreciate your attitude, Miss Blair. But now we have to look after you. You're our key witness. We'd like to keep you in protective custody for a while."

She had no objection. After telephoning appropriate excuses to her boss, she submitted to being the guest of the police department for a week. Although the papers ran the full story, and a number of suspects were picked up, none was the man they wanted. He was too clever for them. He was staying under cover. She had rather guessed that he would.

After that week, she was allowed to go home. But three detectives, taking turns on eight-hour turns on eight-hour shifts, guarded her around the clock. She let them lounge in her living room, even let her bedroom door stay open after she'd retired at night, so they could listen for intruders. Of course no intruder ever came. She had confidently expected that none would.

This arrangement lasted for three weeks, after which time these valuable detectives had better things to do. No other murders had occurred during this interim, and headquarters had begun to think that possibly the man had left the vicinity. At any rate, they had to take the chance and withdraw Alicia Blair's personal bodyguard.

Again she said she understood and thanked them. They promised to keep an eye on the place, arrange for cars to cruise by frequently. They might have insisted the window be boarded up, or that she change her residence, but she was very stubborn about that, and refused to countenance it. And because she felt so strongly about it, her words took on a kind of persuasive eloquence.

When they were finally gone and she was alone again, she did what she had planned to do. But she waited till after dark on that first evening of privacy. Leaving brighter lights on elsewhere, she turned on the small lamp in the bedroom. Then, although the night was cold, she opened the bedroom window wide, undid the little repair job she'd done on the screen, and let the cut section of wire bend visibly toward the outside, toward that large branch of the oak tree. She could mend it again each morning, of course.

Alicia was well aware that she might have to be patient. But, shivering a bit in her slip, she sat down by the window to wait. She knew she'd be all right. She wouldn't struggle. She wouldn't scream.

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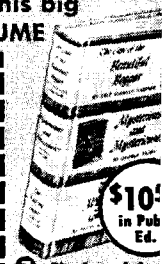

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